



Building Regional Connectors and Networks for Economic Growth

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Executives*

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Introduction

While chambers of commerce have proven the effectiveness of networks of business people in solving problems, many chamber executives have pointed to a lack of common purpose and weak relationships across sectors of communities as a major obstacle to achieving regional goals. The sad reality is that almost every regional advancement advocate points to lack of cohesion, poor communication among sectors and general isolation of individuals who are all devoted to fostering regional health. All parties seem to occupy separate spheres and silos. We all need each other to succeed, but too often, we simply don't communicate.

How can key people, who care passionately about long-term regional growth, be identified within the region and make an impact with their cross-sectoral relationships? That is one of the primary goals of this report, using the "LEADERSHIP Philadelphia Connector" initiative as a model for how connectors can be identified and promoted. If this connectivity can be achieved, more progress can be made for all those with dreams for their regions.

Leadership Networks

Many theories suggest the importance of leadership and leadership networks in helping individuals, organizations and communities work more effectively and efficiently (Gauthier, 2006; Connective Associates, 2009; Hoppe and Reinelt, 2009). These networks are especially important at the metropolitan regional-level where leaders from the public, private and nonprofit sectors face an increasing complex set of opportunities and problems; from building 21st century infrastructure, to improving public education, developing a prosperous and innovative economy, protecting the environment and so much more. It means that regions increasingly need a diverse set of leaders who can step up to seize new opportunities and solve difficult challenges.

As a result, a number of regional networks have started around the country that focus on identifying and connecting individuals from multiple sectors who are in leadership positions or have demonstrated leadership skills and qualities. These networks bring a diverse group of individuals together who possess an array of

resources such as professional experience, social networks, and innovative ideas. But the types and goals of these networks can vary greatly.

Networks of Purpose:

One such network is what top leadership researchers Bruce Hoppe and Claire Reinelt call a **field-policy leadership network**. It is focused on connecting leaders who share common interests and who have a commitment to influencing a field of practice or policy. In this type of network a group of private and public sectors leaders come together to bring about change and improved outcomes to a region. They might focus their efforts on bringing improvement to K-12 school systems in the region or expanding transit options for a metro area.

From our examination of regional cooperation models, it is clear that reaching consensus, securing investment, recruiting activist volunteer support and connecting interested players (in-person and virtually) are key features of effective networks. Virtually all chamber and community leaders we've interviewed through ACCE's Ford Foundation Regional Sustainable Development Fellowship and otherwise, indicate that it is difficult to garner such support in widely dispersed and diverse regions. Because *field-policy* leadership networks are established as coalitions, or communities of practice, those involved naturally share not only common issues, but also a predisposition to work/invest personally in advancing a cause through connections with one another.

The Regional Workforce Alliance of Southeast Wisconsin, Boston Alliance for Early Education, and Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities are all field-policy leadership networks. (See chart on next page for typology).

Networks of Vision:

On the other hand, a **collective leadership network** as described by Hoppe and Reinelt is a self-organized system of social ties among people attracted to a common cause or focused on a shared goal. Its focus might be broader, and its membership more organic. At the metropolitan level this type of network could be a broad vision and goal setting effort that focuses on community and regional improvement. Through the vision or goal setting process it brings together a wide set of leaders and networked individuals.

While those who interact formally through collective leadership networks don't share specific issues, they do tend to hold common values and ambitions for the future of their region/community. We found that some successful collective leadership networks may be temporary - i.e. for the purpose of formulating or launching a major initiative.

Envision Utah in the Salt Lake region of Utah, Myregion.org in the Orlando area, the Toronto City Summit Alliance in Canada, and Visioneering Wichita are all examples of a collective leadership network.

Networks of Peer Leaders:

A third type, and the focus of this case study, is the **peer leadership network**. Hoppe and Reinelt describe the purpose of the peer leadership network as not about influencing policy or mobilizing around a particular issue, but instead focused on a means of identifying and bringing civic leaders and civic connectors together. In a regional context, a peer leadership network is more about the process, less about an identified field of policy or set of goals for regional improvement or development. Once these leaders come together, what they do with their network is up to them. Its rise as a form of region building has come about as an alternative to the other forms of more purposive networks (the field-policy and collaborative leadership networks).

NOTE: In terms of distinguishing characteristics, chambers of commerce and private-sector economic development entities (more specifically their boards of directors) qualify as peer leadership networks. However, the charters, missions, by-laws and membership requirements of chambers result in duties and responsibilities not found in unfettered networks of peer leaders.

This case study examines one such peer leadership network – its goals, process, and outcomes – called the LEADERSHIP Philadelphia’s Connector Project.

Typology of Regional Leadership Networks	
Field-Policy Leadership Network	Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities; Regional Workforce Alliance of Southeast Wisconsin; Boston Alliance for Early Education
Collective Leadership Network	Envision Utah; Myregion.org; Toronto City Summit Alliance; Visioneering Wichita
Peer Leadership Network	LEADERSHIP Philadelphia’s Connector Project; Leadership Louisville Connector Project.

LEADERSHIP Philadelphia’s Connector Project: A Brief Case Study

LEADERSHIP Philadelphia is an independent nonprofit organization with a mission to mobilize and connect the talent of the private sector to serve the community (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009). Five years ago, leaders within the organization began thinking about their then upcoming 50th Anniversary in 2009. The president of the organization, Liz Dow, and the LEADERSHIP board

wanted to do something unique for the city of Philadelphia to mark the occasion. After thinking about several possibilities, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia decided to conduct a research study in 2006 to “facilitate a conversation about leadership and connection in the Philadelphia region” (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009). As part of this effort, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia announced the Connector Project.

A connector can be broadly defined as *a leader who is trusted, a great thinker, innovator and doer with a concern for the common good*. It is often someone who enjoys linking up people who otherwise might not know each other. It may be someone within an organization, company or elected office who is not the top CEO or power-broker but rather, and just as important, recognized by others as someone who is able to get things done. It may be a pastor representing a diverse urban area, a key policy person in a government office, a community relations person of a well-known regional business-civic organization, a neighborhood organizer, or a civic-minded entrepreneur.

Greater Philadelphia’s Connector Project had several goals as it began to identify these leaders and connectors in the region. A fundamental goal of the project was to be at the center of the discussion about good leadership in the Philadelphia region. Related, it wanted to build greater appreciation of vital civic leaders who are trusted, respected, and connect with and to others in the region (Dow and Thornburgh, 2009). “It was important for us to identify people across multiple sectors and to identify people who were not the usual suspects,” says Dow, president of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia (Dow, 2009).

A second goal was to better understand what makes vital civic leaders successful. To do this, the project set out to profile the competencies of successful civic leaders and connectors. A third goal was to convene and connect identified leaders, or connectors, to each other, with the understanding that what the newly identified leaders did with this network was up to them. A final goal was to transmit the competencies of leadership and connectors to the next generation of regional care-takers. This was to be done through development of a school-based curriculum and mentorship opportunities for area youth.

Although the initial goals of the Connector Project sounded simple on paper, it took an extraordinary amount of background planning, board meetings and focus groups throughout greater Philadelphia before the idea for the project got off the ground and achieved region-wide buy-in.

One of the first challenges for LEADERSHIP Philadelphia and the Connector Project Team, a group of eight professionals and former alumni of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia’s existing programs, was to develop an effective process that could

identify a diverse group of trusted leaders across the region. It wanted diversity by sector as well as race, ethnicity, and gender. In addition to these criteria, the Project Team came up with a number of attributes to look for as it identified a group of connectors and leaders across the region. These individuals:

- may or may not already be in the public eye;
- know how to get things done;
- demonstrate concern for the “common good” in actions and attitudes; and
- are trusted by their fellow citizens. (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009)

LEADERHIP Philadelphia next contracted with cultural anthropologist, Karen Stephenson, PhD., to undertake a careful identification process of the region’s connectors. The identification process worked like this: First, LEADERHIP Philadelphia emailed 1,800 area fellows and organizations, such as the Urban League and Pennsylvania Economy League, seeking nominations. It also asked this initial list of 1,800 to forward nomination forms to colleagues and friends to reach as many people as possible (Dow, 2009). LEADERSHIP Philadelphia was able to get the local media involved by having *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Daily News* and *The Philadelphia Business Journal* publish stories about the Connector Project (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009). After six-weeks of an open nomination process, people submitted nearly 4,800 names (Dow, 2009).

As a next step, each nominee was then invited to answer questions about “trusted leadership” in an effort to understand “how they get things done and consider a common good” (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009). In addition to this information, Dr. Stephenson analyzed the names of nominees using social network analysis software she developed. Using a blend of mathematics and social network theory, the software mapped the bonds of transaction, process and trust that held together the Philadelphia region and its civic life. This whittled the initial list down to a smaller number. Finally, a subset of the nominees were interviewed and asked a series of questions, including “what would not have happened in the greater Philadelphia region if you had not been here?” (Dow, 2009).

After the process of collecting names of nominees, analyzing leadership trust networks, sifting through responses to the questionnaire and evaluating interviews, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia arrived with a short list of connectors in the region. By October 2006 it released a final list of 101 Philadelphia connectors. (See www.leadershipphiladelphia.org/connect_list2.html for the list of “101 Philadelphia Connectors”). The individuals on the list represented a diverse set

of the region's civic landscape -- 46 percent were from the nonprofit sector, 33 percent from the private sector, and 15 and six percent from the public and academic sectors, respectively (LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, 2009).

After being selected, the connectors were featured in a prominent story in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and through other media outlets. LEADERSHIP Philadelphia also hosted a convening event of the 101 Connectors. The event was part recognition and part opportunity for the individuals to meet and network.

Following the release of the list, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia completed a study in 2006-2007 to understand what attributes makes leaders and connectors successful. It used these findings to develop a youth leadership/connector curriculum. LEADERSHIP Philadelphia has since partnered with the Philadelphia Youth Network to deploy a pilot curriculum in the Philadelphia schools. A main goal of the youth connector curriculum is to teach children how to connect out of poverty. (Dow, 2009).

Another more recent, follow-up activity has been the completion of a second round of analysis and identification of connectors in the region, this time focused on younger professionals and leaders. This new "Emerging Connectors" list of 101 individuals in the region was released in 2008. (See www.leadershipphiladelphia.org/IMAGES/em_connectors_br.pdf for the list of "101 Emerging Connectors").

With these early successes as its template, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia has plans to document and replicate its process for use by other regions, as well as hold its 50th anniversary event.

Next Steps and Lessons Learned

The case of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia's Connector Project describes a peer leadership network model. The individuals identified as connectors have convened and share a common experience. Yet still, it is too early to determine what type of long-term positive impact these leaders will have on greater Philadelphia. Will connectors reach out to each other via their peer network to share valuable information on the challenges and opportunities to move the region forward? Will they come together as a collective to create innovative solutions to solve complex regional problems? Will their solutions largely remain local or individual, rather than focused on the region's overall well-being? Or, could the connectors simply remain a group of highly talented, relatively autonomous individuals who demonstrate leadership skills in their own daily

lives? There is still much to learn about the outcomes of the Connector Project and how it will affect the future development of the greater Philadelphia region. However, even as an emerging project, the effort provides some important lessons to share with other regional leaders who may want to implement such a strategy. These lessons include:

- **Developing A Leadership Network Takes a Lot of Upfront Time and Resources.** The staff of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia spent countless hours in planning meetings, in focus groups and in discussion with individuals across the Philadelphia region in order to get buy-in and support for the project. While time consuming, the initial investment in planning and program design helps ensure that the network has adequate support as well as a clear mission with tangible outcomes.
- **Leadership Networks Do Not Have to Have A Specific Purpose or Policy Agenda.** Instead leadership networks can be about identifying and recognizing individuals who contribute to their community on a daily basis. In the case of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, the organization was interested in facilitating a region-wide dialogue on leadership and connection. Just as important, through its study on leadership the organization wanted to understand what makes leaders successful.
- **Identifying Leaders within A Region Does Not Mean You Have to Identify the ‘Usual Suspects.’** All too often leadership networks identify individuals who are the most popular or connected, not necessarily the “connectors.” In the Philadelphia region, LEADERSHIP Philadelphia had a significant challenge in trying to identify a diverse group of the most connected leaders from a list of nearly 4,800 nominees. LEADERSHIP Philadelphia was able to select 101 connectors from this sizeable group of nominees because it was very clear upfront about their criteria and used questionnaires, interviews and social network software to assist in the process.
- **Identifying Leaders within a Region May Have Unintended Consequences on an Individual’s Time and Commitments.** During the process of identifying the 101 connectors within greater Philadelphia, Dow was concerned that identifying existing leaders in this way could prevent them from doing what they normally do. This could “over-tax” the identified connectors or even make them less effectual leaders because they would be pulled in too many directions. Leadership networks need to be aware that “shining the light” or acknowledging leaders can result in them being asked to take on more civic responsibilities (e.g. participating on boards, being asked to convene new leaders, leading new initiatives).

Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to elicit further analysis and discussion for the reader and groups of regional leaders. They can be used to help think through the key issues of deploying this as well as other leadership models for a more sustainable region.

1. Does being recognized as a connected leader mean you are a connector? Are they two different things?
2. Given the various types of leadership networks, which do you think works best for your region and why?
3. Identifying leaders within a region can be a difficult task, can you think of a process of indentifying leaders which results in an equitable distribution of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, professions, and expertise?
4. If you want to impact a regional agenda and move policy, how can building a peer leadership network like LEADERSHIP Philadelphia's Connector Project help? What ways could you apply the identified connectors to help move a regional agenda in your metro area?

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