



A Changing Landscape: Future Leadership for the Great Lakes

A Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation from the Institute for Conservation Leadership
Fall 2015

INTRODUCTION

To better understand the current state of leadership development and future leadership needs in the Great Lakes region, the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL), with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (Foundation), conducted a study on:

- How leaders in the Great Lakes think about their role in freshwater advocacy
- What their organizations are doing now to support leadership development
- What gaps need to be filled to achieve significant change and impact going forward

Our inquiry focused on freshwater advocacy organizations in the Great Lakes region. We reviewed current literature on leadership development, interviewed leaders, surveyed executives and staff working in organizations in the region, and reflected on our own experience providing leadership programming for over 25 years. We invited leaders to look toward the horizon, consider the complexity of the issues as they are evolving, and help us build a picture of what type of leadership is needed to be effective into the future and how this kind of leadership could be cultivated.

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP THEMES

ICL identified six themes for organizations, funders, and capacity-building organizations to consider. The concepts are interrelated and suggest a composite picture of leadership going forward. In addition, we offer several recommendations that we hope will promote further discussion and lead to action.

The table below categorizes the themes that emerged from the research and our interpretation of the implications for critical leadership skills needed.

Themes	Conservation and Environmental Organizations Need Leaders Who:
1. Community-Connected Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop a compelling vision and shared strategies ▪ Listen to and engage their communities
2. Strategic Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaborate strategically ▪ Engage multiple sectors
3. Effective Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Manage their nonprofit effectively ▪ Can lead organizational change and growth ▪ Create an organizational culture of strategy, alignment, and innovation
4. Diversity and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build organizations that attract and retain a diverse workforce ▪ Create organizations that are relevant to- and inclusive of- the community they serve
5. Environmental and Conservation Career Path	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create meaningful employment and career opportunities ▪ Attract and retain diverse talent in a competitive and changing marketplace
6. Executive Succession and Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plan and prepare for succession and transition for their organizations and for themselves ▪ Manage and mitigate burnout

METHODOLOGY

During May and June 2015, ICL surveyed 27 executive directors and senior staff, and interviewed 18 leaders. In addition, we facilitated two leadership roundtable conversations involving 9 executive directors and senior staff. Eight Great Lake states and two provinces in Canada were represented. Most of the interviewees and many of the survey respondents represent C.S. Mott Foundation grantees and/or members of Healing Our Waters Coalition.

The survey included questions about size of organization and how long respondents have been in their current job.

- Most (approximately two-thirds) of the respondents were from organizations with an annual budget of \$500,000 or more.
- 20% of respondents have been at their current job for 10 or more years.
- Approximately half of the executive directors have been in their positions for five or more years.

The survey sought to identify current strengths related to leadership and what respondents see as challenges.

In their own organizations, the top leadership skills identified were:

- Collaborating with other conservation leaders
- Communicating and engaging effectively in communities
- Focusing on strategy, planning, alignment, and impact
- Pursuing and delivering innovation

The highest ranking challenges for the Great Lakes environmental sector as a whole were:

- Collaborating with leaders in other sectors
- Building diverse and inclusive organizations
- Pursuing and delivering innovation
- Generating resources and fundraising

When answering the open-ended question, “Over the next decade, what is one important leadership skill or perspective that will be needed from environmental and conservation leaders in the Great Lakes?” respondents gave answers that we grouped into the following categories (listed in order of frequency):

- Community engagement
- Political and advocacy skills
- Cooperation across sectors
- Collaboration
- Culture/Inclusiveness
- Communications
- Career path
- Fundraising

“Problems are only getting more complicated. Easy technical and political solutions are harder to grasp. Successful leaders will be the ones who can both readily grasp the real economic and social drivers of our advocacy targets, and who are willing to shape tactics to address those drivers.”

- Survey Respondent

GREAT LAKES LEADERSHIP REPORT - THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Community-Connected Advocacy

- Leaders who develop a compelling vision and shared strategies
- Leaders who listen to and engage their communities

In interviews, leaders noted a history of successful collaboration efforts *and* a sense of “what’s next”? Navigating increasing complexity (i.e., climate change, demographic changes, technological advances, money in politics, and local vs. national vs. international issues) and a broader set of allies will be key to success. That success will also mean developing a meaningful vision and effective strategies that depend on connecting, communicating, and engaging broader participation beyond those who have traditionally supported environmental causes. As one leader noted, “We need to look at issues people are concerned about. Finding balance between what is needed and what is wanted.”

Independent Sector, a national coalition of charities, foundations, and corporate giving programs, believes that the *dominant culture of leadership will continue to gradually shift from central control towards broad episodic engagement, being adaptive, facilitative, transparent, and inspirational*. Independent Sector anticipates that over the next 20 years, individuals will “swarm,” in loose networks, around shared civic or political purpose, at times sidestepping organizations that are not flexible and equipped to engage with them. If the organization’s assumption about the context for pursuing social impact is correct, freshwater advocacy organizations may have to adapt how they operate and engage advocates, generating new opportunities to achieve results.

Recommendations:

- a. Develop new approaches, tools, and capacities among staff and board members for advocacy efforts that use collaborative approaches and technology-driven solutions.
- b. Look for opportunities to solve complex issues through long-term approaches that use vision and strategy sessions that engage a full mix of community stakeholders.
- c. Support and fund directly, the full range of nonprofit organizations leading and affected by freshwater issues.

2. Strategic Collaboration

- Leaders who are skilled in strategic collaboration
- Leaders who engage multiple sectors

Leaders view continued regional collaboration among conservation and environmental organizations in the Great Lakes to be a given now and into the future. They view collaborative strategies as inherently challenging and time-intensive, but accept their value. Some leaders noted that collaboration is one strategy to be effective, yet it should not be employed if it diverts resources and attention from other important issues.

To have greater impact and relevancy in the future, leaders want to broaden the scope of their partners and work. This requires skillfully and sensitively working across sector and political boundaries. Many are thinking (and in some cases are already engaged) about working with others in health, agriculture, business, community organizations, and local governments.

From ICL's work with coalitions and networks around the country, we know that strategic collaboration requires a set of skills and practices complementary to those that leaders use in their organizations. In our publication, *The Less Visible Leader*, we identified 12 practices from leaders' stories and examples of effective collaboration. Among other skills, they must be adept at "leading from the side," flexible at building an infrastructure that supports the coalition's vision and goals, and embrace ambiguity in the face of multiple commitments, limited resources, and an array of member needs.

Recommendations:

- a. Weave skill development into collaborative entities, especially those that are organized around a mix of regional, multi-sector interests, and/or issues and geographies.
- b. Develop a pilot, multi-sector leadership cohort program that includes building collaborative leadership skills, testing new strategies, and creating opportunities to connect with, learn from, and develop cross-sector relationships.
- c. Engage local foundations with regional and national funders in region-wide leadership development, organizational development, and advocacy impact.
- d. Increase board member engagement with collaborative approaches and cross-sector partnerships through programming, planning processes, and other leadership skill-building gatherings.

3. Effective Organizations

- Leaders who are effective nonprofit managers
- Leaders who lead organizational change and growth
- Leaders who create an organizational culture of strategy, alignment, and innovation

In addition to collaboration and advocacy skills, leaders identified a host of management and organizational development needs for effective leadership in the Great Lakes. Leaders are interested in improving management, fundraising, and operations within their teams and boards of directors, as well as strengthening their organizations' capacity and culture.

While managing change and growth was identified as a medium-level challenge for the region in the survey, leaders are interested in more effectively integrating their work. They seek to scale it up, do more effective long-term planning, and "pursue and deliver innovation." In short, as organizations become stronger, they can collaborate and innovate more readily.

Recommendations:

- a. Increase access to leadership programming and workshops, especially those that increase adaptive capacities and those that serve other sectors.
- b. Encourage and place an emphasis on participating in leadership activities organized on unfamiliar topics, intra-sector networking, and structured learning for leaders to step into new cultural settings, disciplines, and sector settings.
- c. Offer intensive leadership programming and/or coaching in systems thinking and collaboration.

4. Diversity and Inclusion

- Leaders who build organizations that attract and retain a diverse workforce
- Leaders who create organizations that are relevant to- and inclusive of- the community they serve

Many respondents and interviewees expressed interest in and concern about the level and character of diversity in their organizations, as well as the low percentages of people of color on their staff, board, and in their membership. Leaders acknowledge and are concerned about the lack of racial diversity in staff, boards, volunteers, but generally seem at a loss about what to do. The low numbers of people of color employed and involved in Great Lakes' water organizations is a serious concern for the future.

Among Great Lakes organizations, active tension exists around issues related to diversity. *"There is controversy on our board and an active debate in our organization,"* about whether it is an important issue for conservation objectives; a sentiment reflected by a small number of leaders. Other leaders, on the other hand, see it as a key to future success.

Addressing complex societal issues related to race, gender, equity, and inclusion in individual organizations requires attention, time, resources, planning, and an intention at all levels of the organization to embrace and be a multi-cultural organization. Based on the current patterns in the community, recruitment practices need to be updated for Great Lakes organizations to meet the demands of a diverse employment marketplace. Strategies creating diverse candidate pools will be critical in attracting more people of color, individuals representing different generations, and women serving in executive roles. Common recruitment challenges cited in a study by *Commongood Careers* include poor access to diverse networks, interview methods that fail to demonstrate an organization's commitment to diversity, and rushed hiring processes that do not allow for adequate time to develop diverse candidate pools (The Voice of Nonprofit Talent, 2008). Given the lack of diversity in many organizations working in the region, we see this as a key area to give attention.

"Ultimately, we need to pay more, as do most conservation nonprofits, so that our own staff are able to achieve a reasonable quality of life while pursuing what they love... The question is how to build opportunities in organizations and to grow organizations to allow for more opportunities."

- Survey Respondent

Recommendations:

- a. Create tools, cohort training, and strategy development frameworks that tie mission and organizational success to diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies.
- b. Develop and use frameworks and tools to change organizational culture, update recruitment practices, and build more inclusive organizations.
- c. Encourage or develop and support a cohort of regional, state, and local organizations for self-reporting of diversity data as part of the Green 2.0 initiative.
- d. Fund organizations led by people of color doing work that could be connected and related to existing freshwater advocacy and conservation work.

5. Career Path

- Leaders who build organizations that:
 - Create meaningful employment and career opportunities
 - Attract and retain diverse talent in a competitive and changing marketplace

Leaders expressed concerns about employment and career paths for professionals in the Great Lakes region. They said there is a significant amount of lateral and criss-crossing career moves, lower salaries, and limited executive and mid-level professional opportunities. At one of the roundtable discussions, leaders discussed competition with the private sector. Businesses are able to offer higher salaries, a more diverse workplace, and a sense of entrepreneurial innovation that does not currently exist in environmental and conservation organizations working on freshwater issues.

A number of survey respondents also noted that their organizations are working to address these issues. One noted that *"We have a strong reputation and pay better than most nonprofits in the area."* Another said that, *"We provide space for experimentation and growth. That keeps senior staff from feeling like they've plateaued in the organization."*

Recommendations

- a. Expand and develop professional cohort programs or create new professional development opportunities for senior staff to increase their capacity to support career development for staff in their organizations.
- b. Continue funding participation in cohort leadership programs, such as ICL's Leading from Within and Executive Leadership Program, the Environmental Leadership Program's Fellows Program, the Kinship Conservation Fellows Program, among others available regionally and nationally.
- c. Create resources, training, and coaching on recruitment practices to respond to workforce expectations and needs.
- d. Create clearer ways to connect with and build upon existing web portals for jobs, careers, and networking opportunities.

6. Executive Succession and Transition

- Leaders who plan and prepare for succession and transition for their organizations and for themselves
- Leaders who manage and mitigate burnout

Leadership succession is an important, often difficult, topic for individuals and organizations to address. One executive director in the region described the current set of executives as a *“short list of overburdened sector leaders.”* Another responded to the survey by warning that *“Leadership...in this region is going to face an absolute crisis within the next five or so years, with many leaders facing the same stage of retirement.”*

Literature on the subject of executive succession and transition suggests that long-term leaders, in particular, need skilled and sensitive support in the decision-making and planning for transition (long-term or short-term) for themselves. Executive directors can be reluctant to bring up succession planning with their boards, and vice versa.

Leaders in the future will need tools and skilled coaches to help them consider how to create an effective transition for themselves and their organizations and how to leave behind a culture of organizational resiliency. Long-standing executive directors may need help imagining their identity separate from the organization, exploring creative options for next steps, such as a similar or growth position, consulting, teaching, or writing projects.

The pace and demands of the work are also a challenge to establishing an organizational culture that values work/life balance. As well as the flexibility desired by many of the current generation of leaders, and new employees entering the workforce. Restructuring positions through shared services (especially in smaller organizations), strengthening supports to executives, and creating flexible work environments, may provide some relief. Formal and informal peer learning and support circles can also help.

Recommendations:

- a. Provide professional support for organizational leaders and boards connecting organizational capacity-building with leadership development.
- b. Initiate a regional working group on conservation careers, succession, and pipeline development for freshwater and future leadership in the Great Lakes.
- c. Offer tailored supports such as coaching and peer planning retreats to senior executives for professional development and long-term transition planning, including sabbaticals, research/writing projects, career and avocation planning, or financial planning.
- d. Help executive directors build their internal leadership teams, through grooming staff, providing cross-training, and/or taking a sabbatical.
- e. Create a lifelong leadership fellowship to provide transition and succession assistance to late-stage executives, which could include organizational and personal planning, sabbaticals and/or mini-grants to plan or start encore or transition projects.

- f. Build individual professional development for every staffer into the annual operating budget.

GREAT LAKES LEADERSHIP REPORT - CONCLUSIONS

The six themes outlined in this report are interconnected. Many leaders and their organizations are actively engaged in thinking about and taking steps to address the opportunities and challenges they present for the long-term success in protecting the freshwater resource of the Great Lakes.

Going forward, it will be important for leaders to continue managing increasing complexity and to engage a broader set of allies. At the same time, they will need the skills and resources to strengthen their organizations as they manage change, both internal and external, and to attract and retain a diverse and multi-talented staff.

ICL has identified a variety of skills and capacities related to the themes that can be addressed at multiple levels of the system—by individual leaders, by organizations, by funders, by capacity-builders, and by collaborative efforts across the entire environmental and conservation community in the Great Lakes region. We look forward to engaging the whole community in dialogue, planning, and action.

LEADERS INTERVIEWED OR ATTENDING A ROUNDTABLE

Ann Baughman, Freshwater Futures

Joel Brammeier, Alliance for the Great Lakes

Paul Bubelis, Sustainability Network

Mike Carlson, Gathering Waters Conservancy

Nicola Crawhall, Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Cities Initiative

Adrienne Esposito, Citizens Campaign for a Clean Environment

Molly Flanagan, Alliance for the Great Lakes

Nancy Goucher, Environmental Defence Canada

Cheryl Kallio, Freshwater Future

Chris Kolb, Michigan Environmental Council

Howard Learner, Environmental Law & Policy Center

Kristy Meyer, Ohio Environmental Council

Liat Podolsky, EcoJustice

Jean Pogge, Delta Institute

David Rankin, Great Lakes Protection Fund

Mark Redsten, Clean Wisconsin

Terry Rees, Association of Ontario Cottagers

Jill Ryan, Freshwater Future

Stephanie Smith, Alliance for the Great Lakes

Lindsay Telfer, Freshwater Alliance

David Ullrich, Great Lakes & St. Lawrence Cities Initiative

Jumana Vasi, Program Officer, Environment Staff, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

April Wepler, Freshwater Future

LEADERSHIP AND NONPROFIT SECTOR INTERVIEWEES

Errol Mazursky, Environmental Leadership Program

Shirley Sagawa, Center for American Progress

Paul Schmitz, Leading Inside Out

Pratichi Shah, Flourish Talent Management Solutions

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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