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The Less Visible Leader

Emerging Leadership Models for Environmental Networks, Coalitions, and Collaboratives

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Michael Noble, Executive Director of Fresh Energy, is fond of a story about Martin Luther King. "Before he became a national figure, Dr. King had his church and he was comfortable in his role. His peers saw his potential, but they had to convince him that his church would be OK. He was a reluctant leader. He wasn't looking for a bigger stage."

Michael is involved with RE-AMP, a network of 144 nonprofits and foundations working on climate change and energy policy. Over the last decade, RE-AMP has stopped 39 of 40 proposed coal-fired electric plants from being built in the Midwest – a level of success that none of its members could have achieved alone. And yet, like Dr. King, nearly all the key players have their own nonprofit commitments, priorities, and identities. It can be hard to combine and balance these with their collective efforts.

We were thirty minutes into our conversation before Michael pointed out, "You know, I haven't said the word 'RE-AMP' yet. That's because the network exists to serve the members, not displace them. We barely have a brand, and that's intentional." This desire to balance competing interests and needs can extend from the individual leaders to the way the coalition thinks about and positions itself. Many effective networks operate a little below radar, managed by leaders with limited visibility – and they often prefer it that way.

Are network leadership skills different from those needed to direct a nonprofit organization or a small business? For the past 25 years, the Institute for Conservation Leadership has worked with individuals, organizations, and networks to strengthen the environmental movement, so we've been asking ourselves this question for a long time. To continue our research, we recently dipped into the latest literature and interviewed eighteen on-the-ground leaders guiding collaborative efforts across North America.

The short answer to the question is *both/and*. Some behaviors are the same (and may be even more important in a coalition setting) while others are unique. This paper incorporates the same both/and thinking, while emphasizing the special capabilities and attitudes that set network leaders apart and can make their collaborative work more successful.

A note about language: Throughout this report, you will find the words *network, coalition, collaborative, partnerships*, and *membership*. For some people interviewed, the specific noun is important, and in those cases we've done our best to honor that. One leader defined the distinction as follows: "A coalition or campaign has one purpose and often dissolves when the goal is achieved. A network is intended to continually spin off ideas and projects because of relationships of trust, but what these will be is unpredictable." Others used these nouns interchangeably to describe their collective effort. In all cases, these efforts involve a variety of individuals, organizations, or both, working together on common projects and in many cases with shared objectives.

ICL's practices for net-centric leadership

Catalyzes a culture of spirited cooperation

1. Listens deeply to fully appreciate and understand the diversity of perspectives and motivations held by all involved.
2. Shows gratitude and encourages mutual appreciation for the ideas and contributions of all.
3. Regularly uses both/and thinking to identify solutions that meet both shared and individual goals and needs.
4. Communicates openly and clearly, matching the medium to the message.
5. Fosters opportunities (at all levels of the system) to develop camaraderie and trust

Shares power and generates momentum

6. Creates space for others to step up and contribute
7. Embraces ambiguity and encourages experiments and innovations
8. Helps the group to develop enough infrastructure to effectively make decisions and keeps everyone moving forward
9. Pays attention to conflicts in values and beliefs and productively orchestrates resolution

Stays true to the long-term vision while navigating frequent twists and turns

10. Persistently holds a clear picture of the purpose for working together
11. Helps those inside and outside the collaborative effort understand the progress that is being made as well as the roots of that success.
12. Courageously continues to adapt in an effort to successfully achieve the long-term vision.

The Net-Centric Leader: A Field Guide

"I think some of us are hard-wired for cooperation and collaboration," says Michael Noble. This report is an attempt to draw the wiring diagram, which includes and connects a variety of capabilities and sensibilities as outlined below.

While some leaders may have innate abilities that serve them well in a collaborative environment, we don't mean to imply that you either have these skills or you don't. Pretty much everything on the list can be learned with intention, practice, and support from team members.

"How do you manage people you have no authority over?"

— Derek Brockbank, Restore the Mississippi River Delta

One key leadership challenge was voiced by Derek Brockbank, campaign director of Restore the Mississippi River Delta, a coalition of several national and regional organizations. "How," he asks, "do you manage people you have no authority over?" The answer might be found in the suite of behaviors outlined below.

It's complicated: Embracing ambiguity, building infrastructure

Leaders never operate in a vacuum, and their success or failure depends to a significant degree on their circumstances and systems. Effective network leaders co-exist pretty comfortably with ambiguity, multiple commitments, and limited resources. Indeed, the ability to successfully manage under these circumstances can make or break a coalition, as noted in the stories and quotes that follow.

Ben Helphand serves as the board president of GreenNet, which calls itself "Chicago's greening network." They coordinate the Green and Growing Fair, a twenty-year-old event organized by and for the city's gardeners. "Honestly," he says, "it's not clear who is a member of GreenNet and who isn't. We're zealously inclusive; we want to make it easy for people to participate. So we don't worry about it."

Johanna Miller , who coordinates the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN), echoes the same idea. "We don't define membership. Any community or local energy coordinator can join. It's based on a loose set of principles; if you agree with those principles, you're in. In the beginning, our founding partners wanted to stay away from advocacy. Over time, it's become clear that grassroots leaders are interested in policy and advocacy, so the line has blurred a bit, but it hasn't manifested as a problem."

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—Johanna Miller, Vermont Natural Resources Council and Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN)

Melanie Allen, who organizes a network of land trusts and community development organizations for the Conservation Trust of North Carolina, adds, "We accept that partner commitments will change, and we try to work with what we have."

With a few notable exceptions, the leaders interviewed talked about living with multiple ambiguities: emerging membership models, partly defined leadership roles, uncertain funding, power shifts among network participants, individuals and organizations that come and go. Many juggle their coalition work with other job responsibilities. They are designing, building, and evaluating their networks while also managing them, and most are doing it without a map.

Some observers might confuse ambiguity with sloppiness or laziness; this would be a big mistake. These people are well-organized, work hard, and are intentional about fulfilling their responsibilities. They survive and even thrive with a degree of unclarity that leaders in other circumstances might find intolerable.

These leaders expressed a deep wariness about getting entangled in debates over collective governance, membership, decision-making, or even the appropriate noun to describe their interrelationships. "We've gone around in circles about the language," says Derek Brockbank, "so we use several words. We're a campaign, but we use coalition when it seems useful."

"We are intentionally informal. We work on a 'y'all come' model; this finesses the tension and distrust among groups. Our network is basically self-selected. Then we ask, 'Who wants to do the work?'"

—Michele Erenberg, Gulf Restoration Network

"Structural details are spirit-killing" says Traci Barkley of Prairie Rivers Network. "Set them aside. Start by naming shared intentions and building trust." Her colleague Glynnis Collins adds, "More structure would have driven out many essential participants. Having less structure allows things to bubble up." To date, the Heartland Coalfield Alliance, which is co-managed by Prairie Rivers Network, has made decisions using an evolving discussion-and-consensus process. "We haven't needed to take any votes yet," says Barkley.

To be clear, some of the collaboratives outlined in this report have specific membership structures and decision-making processes, but most are sorting it out on the fly. "We are intentionally informal," says Michele Erenberg of the Gulf Restoration Network, which manages the Gulf Future campaign. "We work on a 'y'all come' model; this finesses the tension and distrust among groups. Our network is basically self-selected. Then we ask, 'Who wants to do the work?'"

"The leadership of taking on the logistics. The email reminders, typing up meeting notes… Many of our partners are regular people with day jobs, not professional conserva-tionists. Nobody has time to do this, but you do it anyway. These details hold the group together."

—Glynnis Collins, Prairie Rivers Network

"Some of our funders wanted more structure," reports one leader, "but this led to unnecessary internal arguments. So we build the structure gradually. We have informal rules of conduct; we use consensus and then vote if necessary. Some members have left due to changes in focus, but no one has left due to arguments about process."

While many leaders are cautious about creating formal structures, everyone interviewed mentioned the need for effective infrastructure: facilitation, coordination, and communication. Glynnis Collins calls this, "The leadership of taking on the logistics. The email reminders, typing up meeting notes, the stupid doodle polls…" She sighs. "Many of our partners are regular people with day jobs, not professional conservationists. Nobody has time to do this, but you do it anyway. These details hold the group together."

Some networks profiled in the report have designated staff coordinators, but several are managed by people who have other work responsibilities and are serving as either part-time paid or part-time volunteer leaders. The Heartland Coalfield Alliance is largely managed by two staff members at Prairie Rivers Network; employees of the Gulf Restoration Network fill a similar role for the Gulf Future campaign.

In other cases, this function is dispersed. RE-AMP has staff capacity spread across ten different nonprofits in several states, including people hired for coordination, evaluation, media relations, developing and maintaining an online presence, and staffing various working groups. They have lots of staff but no central office.

Regardless of how this function is structured, the tendency is to underestimate both the hours required and the number of details needing attention. Both are endless. The people profiled here accept that reality with a measure of grace. When it comes to logistics, "We're not the conductor, just central switching," says Cheryl King Fischer of the New England Grassroots Environment Fund, a funder-activist collaborative, "but we are strong enough to keep things moving down the track."

Most collaborative efforts will live or die based on the quality (and in some cases the quantity) of coordination. "I'm not sure that the words 'efficient' and 'network' go together," says Johanna Miller, "but we have become far more efficient by having dedicated staff serving as a defined point of contact."

Leading from beside: Humility, mindfulness, and the value of stepping up by stepping back

The Environmental Priorities Coalition is a network of 25 nonprofits working together on Washington State's legislative agenda. The network has real power. According to co-chair Joan Crooks, who also serves as executive director of the Washington Environmental Council, some legislators pitch the coalition to support their bills, rather than the other way around. Among their many victories: laws to phase out persistent toxic chemicals, improve energy efficiency criteria for state buildings, and reduce motor vehicle emissions.

Crooks is fond of the phrase "pay attention." When asked to define network leadership skills, she says, "Pay attention to brushfires and rumblings; don't let them simmer." Another advisory: "Pay attention to when an issue is ripe and ready, then move." This combination of mindfulness plus an intuitive sense of when to lay back and wait, and when to push the group forward, is one of the most valuable assets in leading a collaborative effort. Rick Reed of the Garfield Foundation, who has been involved with RE-AMP from the beginning, phrases this as "having an ear for story" – the story of where the group needs to go based on listening, paying attention, and finding the threads and action items that tie together a variety of viewpoints.

Pat Letizia of Alberta Ecotrust offers advice that some would consider counterintuitive, but has served her organization well. "You need to manage your attention, not your time," she says.

Of all the collaborations outlined in this report, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) is the one most intentionally structured to honor network theory and practice. USDN is a private professional network of municipal government sustainability officials. They regularly "map the network" to see who is connected to whom.

"My goal is to have less and less go through me. One of our core principles is, if the members don't lead it, let it go."

— Julia Parzen, Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN)

"They never include me in the map," says coordinator Julia Parzen, with a touch of pride. "My goal is to have less and less go through me. One of our core principles is, if the members don't lead it, let it go." One definition of effective network leadership, says Rick Reed, "is trusting that a direction will emerge from the group." Adds Joan Crooks, "I make myself step back and let other ideas come forward."

Our efforts are "member driven, not Nina-driven," says Nina Bohlen, who directs Smart Growth California, a funder collaborative. "We are moving toward a model of shared leadership. Members set the learning agenda and identify strategic priorities. The more excited they get about the programs, the more they want to be involved in problem-solving and decision-making."

Network theory is built on the principle of leadership from within. "When people don't step forward to lead, it doesn't happen," says Julia Parzen. "We don't use outside speakers; it's all peer to peer learning."

When asked what he does as a leader to make his collaboration successful, Ben Helphand says, "Somebody had to stick their neck out. This whole thing is a weird leap of faith; we're trying to get somewhere we haven't thought of before." His spirit of humility is echoed by Pat Letizia, who says "Our work ripples out in ways we can't take credit for." This sort of non-branding (or even anti-branding) sensibility would be anathema to many organizations and their directors, and yet it's essential for network leadership.

The not-so-secret sauce for building relationships

Alberta Ecotrust is a grantmaking collaboration between industry (mostly oil and gas) and environmental nonprofits. They like to use the slogan, *On Common Ground: Creating the Future We Want in the Environment We Need*. "Traditional adversaries have more in common than people think," says executive director Pat Letizia. "We assume the best in each other and find a way to capture common values. It's a little different here in Canada. When CEOs from the U.S. come up to work with Alberta energy companies, they're surprised by the level of trust and collaboration between industry and environmental NGOs."

To demonstrate the difference, Pat tells a story about a new corporate partner who participated in a grant review meeting. He spent time talking with a nonprofit partner whose indigenous community was being affected by energy development. During the closing exercise, "He told the group, 'I learned today that my company is creating problems in this man's community, and I am going to do something about it.' And he did."

In both direct and indirect ways, Pat's story underscores a few essential elements of successful collaborative leadership.

Trust. Networks tend to succeed or fail based on how people feel about their participation, so effective leaders invest the time and effort to reinforce positive feelings and deeper connections. In Nina Bohlen's words, "One of our primary products is relationships. I try to come from a place of service. Much of my time is spent on relationship-building; it's high-touch."

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—Nina Bohlen, Smart Growth California

Julie Parzen says, "Take the time to build relationships and establish trust," she says. "To make this model work, you need as much open time as structured time, and you need to be a good listener. All of our opportunities have come from the network, not from me."

Listening. In speaking with these many leaders, the word I heard most often was *listening*, both responsively and proactively. As he has time, Ben Helphand makes personal phone calls to everyone in his network. "Find out what connects people to the process," he says, "and try to honor that." Cyn Sarthou suggests a similar approach, "One on one attention is essential. We call people and say, 'This is yours,' and then we ask, 'What do you want?' We don't tell them what to think or do."

Traci Barkley and Brian Perbix, who co-coordinate the Heartland Coalfield Alliance, try to "lift up the quieter voices" to ensure that everyone is heard. Without intentional, active listening – and reflecting these voices back to the group – most collaborative efforts will never reach their potential.

Engagement. Michael Noble talks freely about the "affection and admiration" that characterizes his RE-AMP relationships. "Our meetings are fun. We have a lot of pride. It's not insular – new junior leaders are accepted and appreciated. We realize that we need each other, so we take off our self-interest hats and try to look after the collective health of the network."

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Julia Parzen frames this point in a different way. "Every individual has to have an 'aha moment' about the value of the network. At that point, they start giving and sharing, and not just taking. We try to amplify those moments."

Food. Finally, a piece of community organizing wisdom from Kimery Wiltshire, whose network is profiled below. "Treat your partners like the exceptional people they are: feed them really well."

You can't always get what you want

"All partners are not created equal," says one seasoned leader – a shorthand way of describing the power imbalances inherent in any collaboration. It's easy – too easy – for the most powerful organizations to dominate discussions and decisions, which will eventually drive away the weaker partners. "There are times to push," this person says, "and there are times to let others win." Understanding this calculus, which can change from day to day and even moment to moment, is one of the most critical skills for inclusive network leadership.

"People enter coalitions with different expectations, and you have to respect and engage them even when you can't meet their needs. We're trying to serve individual groups while also serving the whole, and it can be difficult."

— Brian Perbix, Prairie Rivers Network and Heartland Coalfield Alliance

"Find a compromise. Solutions lie in the middle," says Pat Letizia, describing her approach to both running her organization and solving environmental problems. "You have to say, 'This is not the hill I am going to die on.'"

In Illinois, several members of the Heartland Coalfield Alliance challenged the wastewater permit for an underground mine that would have threatened local water supplies. A local organization wanted to close the mine entirely, but according to organizer Brian Perbix, "There was no way that appealing the water permit would have stopped the mine." Legal action and negotiation eventually led to a more stringent permit, which set standards for better water treatment protocols across the state. "It was a huge policy victory," says Perbix, "but the neighbors were disappointed. It shows that one person's victory can be another person's loss."

He adds, "People enter coalitions with different expectations, and you have to respect and engage them even when you can't meet their needs. We're trying to serve individual groups while also serving the whole, and it can be difficult."

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— Cyn Sarthou, Gulf Restoration Network

Says Ben Helphand of GreenNet, "The biggest ongoing challenge is how to win buy-in from the collaborating institutions. It's one thing to ask everyone why they are at a meeting or part of a campaign; it's another, deeper thing to have institutional buy-in." Sometimes people aren't clear why they are involved: for their own organizational self-interest, the good of the network, or some combination of the two. "Maybe it doesn't matter," he says, adding, "It's OK to allow people to bow out and save face."

Cyn Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network, says, "You can't be everything to everyone, so don't get paralyzed. Walk through the minefield. If people don't follow through, if they change their minds at the last minute, if they can't agree to disagree – well, move on without them."

Deep patience: Designing networks for the long haul

If you're looking for a mantra, consider this offering from Ben Helphand: "Methodical, slow, and steady." Because collaborations are about relationships, and because they usually involve people and organizations with diverging agendas, nothing comes easy. The bigger they grow, the more complicated it gets. As Brian Perbix of Prairie Rivers Network notes, "More partners equals more time."

"Methodical, slow, and steady."
—Ben Helphand, GreenNet

Effective network leaders are not only marathon runners; they also design the course, promote the race, process the entry forms, recruit volunteers, set up the first aid stations, give out prizes, personally thank all the runners, and feed everyone during the race. Under these circumstances, it can be difficult to maintain your sense of perspective, your sense of balance, and your sense of humor. The term "deep patience" only begins to hint at the required stamina and sensibility.

Consider Carpe Diem West, a network of nonprofits, water utilities, scientists, foundations, and government agencies working to address impact of climate change on water supplies in the American West. Their work follows "a century of Western water wars," says executive director Kimery Wiltshire. Unlike some networks profiled in this report, they deliberately choose who participates in the core leadership group. "The situation is competitive and balkanized," says Wiltshire, "with multiple overlapping jurisdictions. The whole thing is fraught with peril, and it won't be untangled quickly."

Through Carpe Diem West's Healthy Headwaters program, water utilities are learning to pay attention to what's happening upstream – for example, the impact of upland forest fires on downstream water quality and quantity. The network seeks common cause and a common understanding among non-traditional allies, including wilderness advocates and municipal utilities that need to guarantee water to their urban and suburban customers. "For us to succeed locally," says one water utility manager, "we have to work regionally, and Carpe Diem West provides that vehicle."

According to Wiltshire, "Even the phrase *climate change* is controversial, so we talk about *climate uncertainty* or *water security* or a *long-term drought*. It's important not to get hung up on the language. It took several years to agree on a definition of the problem, but it was time well spent. The process strengthened our relationships."

The value of the network, she says, is reminiscent of the fable of the blind men and the elephant. "Each participant has their hands on a different portion of the elephant, and they can describe what they see and feel from their unique perspective. Nobody can see it all, but when we combine all these perspectives, we begin to understand the dimensions of the problem. That enables us to collaboratively plan and act."

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Given the long-term nature of this work, every leader must also be a committed fundraiser. As Joan Crooks of the Washington Environmental Council suggests, "We must raise sustained funding for coalition-building. It's not a one or two-year grant proposition." Many collective efforts fail because

too little funding was committed, at the beginning, to build relationships and trust, and to create the necessary infrastructure for collaboration.

Imagine the following foundation RFP, or request for proposal: "Seeking leaders and networks that embrace ambiguity, don't have a clearly defined structure, and are willing to work together for years just to build trust. We don't expect any measurable outcomes in the short run. Willing to guarantee large amounts of unrestricted cash for several years."

Not very likely, right? As Rick Reed of the Garfield Foundation notes, "Many foundation officers are ill-suited to participate in networks" because their institutions require a defined accountability structure, short-term impact for the dollars invested, and objective ways to measure that impact. Collaborative efforts – especially the ambitious, challenging, gnarly ones – have a hard time meeting these criteria.

"We want to work together, but we have to due to grant requirements."

— Derek Brockbank, Restore the Mississippi River Delta

And yet several funders have chosen to invest. "Shared funding brought us together," says Johanna Miller of the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network. As Derek Brockbank of Restore the Mississippi River Delta says, "We want to work together, but we have to due to grant requirements." As noted in a recent report by the Monitor Institute detailing the efforts of the David & Lucille Packard Foundation, there is a "growing interest among funders in investing in networks."

In the case of RE-AMP, the Garfield Foundation granted more than $1.5 million in the first two years. "We made an intentional decision to invest in infrastructure," says Rick Reed. "We were trying to avoid nonprofit malpractice: asking for collaboration without paying for the process to create a collaborative infrastructure."

One challenge – especially in funder/grantee relationships – is figuring out how to identify and track relevant benchmarks to measure the network's impact. Smart Growth California, like many collaboratives, operates at several levels simultaneously: individuals, pairs, informal groups, and formal committees. As coordinator, Nina Bohlen works to build relationships and strengthen the network at each of these levels. If one of the collaborative's primary products is relationships, as Nina says, the trick is to find the right metrics (which will vary by level) to gauge the strength and effectiveness of their shared work. In Kimery Wiltshire's words, "How do we measure the quality of relationships, and not just the quantity?"

If their product is relationships, as Bohlen says, the trick is to find the right metrics… to gauge the strength and effectiveness of their shared work. "How do we measure the quality of relationships, and not just the quantity?"

— Kimery Wiltshire, Carpe Diem West

One of the basic tools of social network analysis is ***network mapping***: creating a diagram that shows who is connected to whom and the strength of those relationships. One benchmark of an effective network, says Julia Parzen, is "an increasing density of network connections." The Urban Sustainability Directors Network uses metrics based on participation. For example, all members must respond to two out of three surveys per year, and 80% of members actively participate in at least one user group, which focus on a variety of topics ranging from climate change adaptation to creating bike-sharing programs.

Photo: Dianne Russell

Michael Noble suggests beginning any collaborative effort with a mapping exercise, because it will reveal both relationships and opportunities. "The map shows everybody's piece: 'Hey, I'm in there.'" Rick Reed recalls an early RE-AMP meeting when their network map was posted on the wall. "The story of where we should focus," he said, "was on that map. We didn't understand it until we could see it."

Even after the network is built, it requires ongoing investment, maintenance, and education at both the individual and collective levels. "I would like to better understand network theory," says Johanna Miller, "but how do we pay for the time to learn these things?" Rick Reed describes the RE-AMP network as "a learning community. We are trying to get smarter over time. We look for examples and bright spots in other regions, so we can try out their methodology." Two people we interviewed suggested a retreat for all the leaders profiled in this report, so they can learn from each other and their respective collectives. This kind of peer to peer skill-building and support is essential for creating effective networks.

"We need to push each other harder, respectfully but honestly," Joan Crooks says. "We need to be tougher on ourselves."

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— Rick Reed, the Garfield Foundation and RE-AMP

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— Joan Crooks, Washington Environmental Council and Environmental Priorities Coalition

Networks: The future of activism is now

It may have always been true, but it's even truer today: most environmental problems we face cannot be solved by individual nonprofits working on their own. Big long-term challenges like climate change, habitat loss, and food insecurity will only be addressed by building effective networks that include a diversity of perspectives and involve a wide variety of constituencies and organizations.

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Following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, "The scale of the disaster forced groups to coalesce, like it or not," says Cyn Sarthou. The Gulf Future campaign, working with Restore the Mississippi River Delta and other coalitions – in effect, a network of networks – successfully advocated for the RESTORE Act, which will return 80% of oil industry fines to the Gulf states for environmental and economic restoration programs. This was a huge victory for the region.

Networks are emerging at every size and scale. On a regional level, RE-AMP has had similar success in stopping the expansion of coal-fired electric plants across the Midwest. Many statewide coalition efforts, from North Carolina and Vermont to California and Washington, have protected farmland and wildlife habitat, reduced energy consumption, shifted funding to address the impacts of growth and development, and effectively lobbied for a variety of environmental protections. At a local level, GreenNet is strengthening Chicago's community gardens and the gardeners who share them.

"We made a bet on the team model. We believed we could have a bigger impact by helping to put the pieces together to accomplish one big thing."

— Rick Reed,RE-AMP and the Garfield Foundation

"We made a bet on the team model," says Rick Reed of the Garfield Foundation. "We believed we could have a bigger impact by helping to put the pieces together to accomplish one big thing." It's a bet that many organizers and funders are making. When they invest in leaders who practice net-centric leadership – strengthening relationships, building shared infrastructure, being comfortable with complexity and ambiguity – the bet is more likely to pay off.

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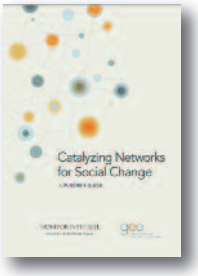

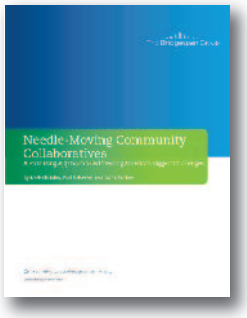

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