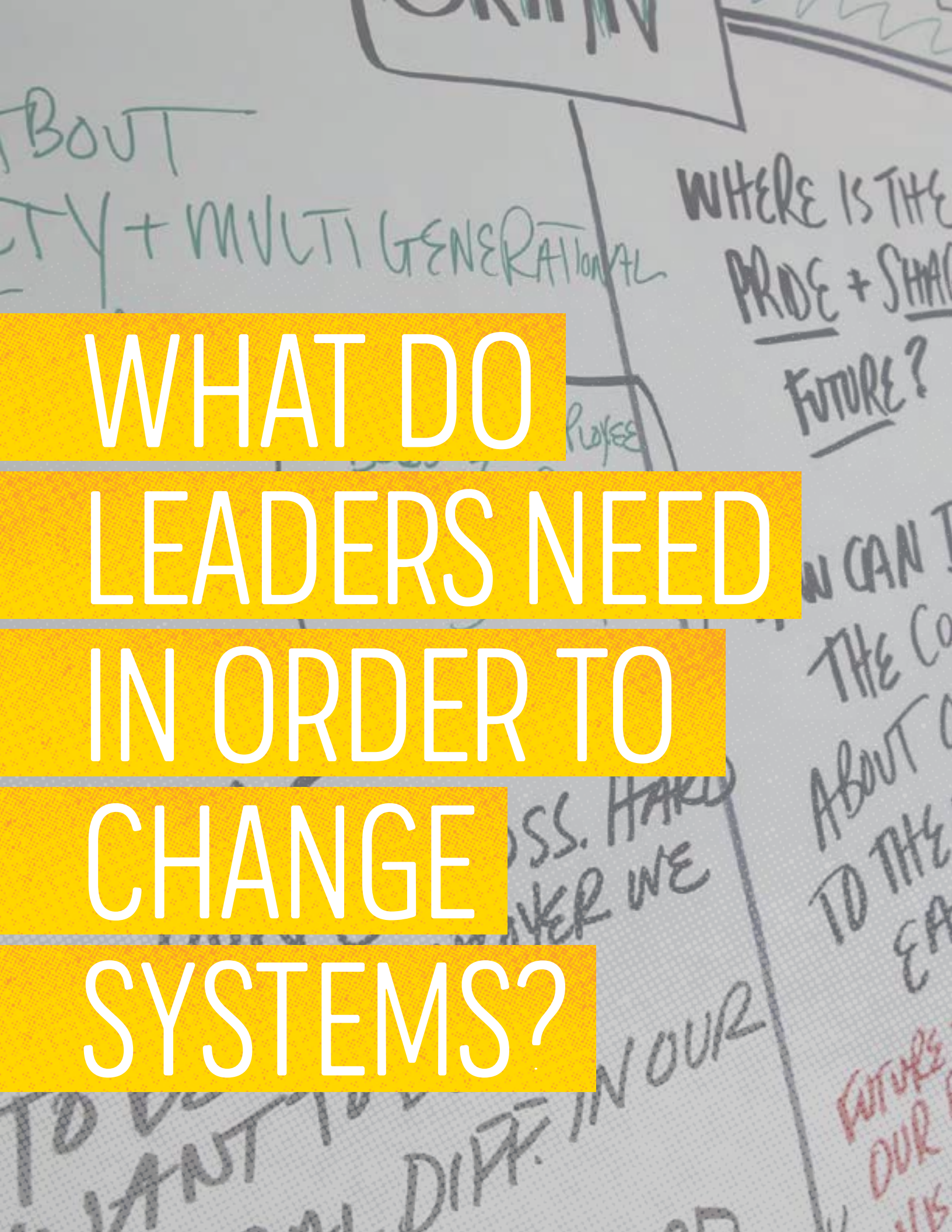# LEADING SYSTEMS CHANGE

A Workbook for Community Practitioners and Funders

This book is for the brave new wave of civic leaders on the front lines of social change looking to impact systems, for communities with high potential to transform through cross-sector collaboration, for funders seeking to create holistic leadership networks, and for facilitators who crave real-life models of networks that "show don't tell" the way forward. We hope it helps fill a gap in the field, spark a conversation about the kind of leadership we need now, and ultimately, catalyze the change needed in many communities.

WHAT DO LEADERS NEED IN ORDER TO CHANGE SYSTEMS?

LEADING SYSTEMS CHANGE

A Workbook for Community Practitioners and Funders

By Heather McLeod Grant and Adene Sacks

THE FRONT LINES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

It's a challenging time to be on the front lines of social change. The communities in which we live and work face complex problems—from persistent poverty, income inequality, and the opioid crisis to racism, mass incarceration, and climate change—that are scaling faster than our best approaches to solving them. Fatigued, isolated, and frustrated, many of the social change leaders working to address these challenges are losing trust in the democratic process and longing for a new path forward.

These leaders are caught inside a liminal moment. What it means to lead social change is rapidly shifting. Individuals, organizations, and even sectors can no longer work in isolation and expect to move the needle or create lasting impact on increasingly interrelated systems-level problems. In this era of constant and rapid disruption, social change is systems change. But if transforming systems so that they work better for everyone is the *why* of this work, then the missing piece for leaders is the how. Just how can we collaborate and get productive in complex systems? How can we re-create community that has equity at its center? And how will we need to change as leaders to get this work done?

> *Individuals, organizations, and even sectors can no longer work in isolation and expect to move the needle or create lasting impact on increasingly interrelated systems-level problems.*

In *Leading Systems Change*, we show that being a systems leader demands a new kind of toolkit—one filled with the approaches, mindsets, and support required for seeing, acting, and leading change across systems and in relationship with others. Today's leaders need help building their collaborative capacity and learning to build it in others; practice in crossing boundaries and aligning multi-racial and multi-sector teams productively; and opportunities to grow their self-awareness, their systems awareness, and their ability to act and learn from a place of empathy. They need experience and confidence in having tough conversations about race, power, and issues of equity. And they need fellow travelers—other leaders who can become co-conspirators on this journey to move past what divides us, toward what unites us.

THE NEW LEADERSHIP NETWORK

In *Leading Systems Change*, we share the story of how we worked for more than five years to equip leaders with this kind of toolkit through the New Leadership Network (NLN). In 2012, we set out to design and develop a program that would bring together local leaders to learn, build relationships, and collaborate for a better future in California's Central Valley—a region that is agriculturally abundant yet economically and socially underserved. With funding from the James Irvine Foundation, we launched the first NLN in Fresno County in 2013, followed by a second NLN in nearby Stanislaus County in 2016.

It was understood from the beginning that the NLN would evolve, yet the impact on these leaders was almost immediate. Many began deeply connecting with one another and with their own aspirations for change. Some who had stood on opposite sides of issues began to hear and absorb opposing perspectives. Instead of seeing just their piece of the community, these leaders started seeing the whole picture and experimenting with new ways to tackle old challenges. Individually and as a network, they began to see what they could achieve if the hurdles that kept them from impact were brought to the surface, talked about in new ways, and transformed into a starting place for doing things differently.

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What started as an experiment in fostering a collective approach to community change—and building the capacity of leaders to impact systems—has emerged as a promising mechanism for making progress on longstanding local problems. Looking beyond these two communities, we believe the NLN can serve as a powerful model for how leaders in other communities can organize themselves to create systems change.

A "HOW-TO" OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Across two networks and different generations of design and facilitation teams, funders, and community partners, we have learned an enormous amount about what it takes to create place-based cross-sector networks, build leaders' capacities, and help them drive real impact locally. While there are a number of good books and articles on how to create networks for social impact, there is very little on how to build leaders' capacities to be "system leaders." Ultimately, we wanted to create a resource that speaks to both aims: building a systems change network and building leaders' skills for a new era.

In *Leading Systems Change*, we walk readers through our process for preparing and empowering a network of leaders to transform the local systems in which they live and act. The book starts with a detailed case study of how we designed, implemented, and launched the NLN in both Fresno and Stanislaus counties. In the last section of the book, we offer a more "hands-on" guide, sharing many of the exercises and activities that we use in the program, along with links to additional templates, worksheets, and resources downloadable from the NLN website.

THE WHERE, THE WHAT, AND THE WHO

In the case study, we cover many of the critical stages and choices we experienced before the program launched, beginning with **assessing community readiness** (Chapter 2). Does the community exhibit the characteristics that make it conducive to this kind of intervention? Systems-level challenges are a starting condition for a leadership network, and the lack of vertical and horizontal connectivity can signal openness to a new way of working. But these indicators are not proxies for community readiness. There needs to be a desire for change—and if local leaders aren't motivated to try new ways of working, it could be difficult for this approach to succeed.

What do leaders need in order to change systems? What new competencies will help them build their capacity to lead collectively? In Chapter 3, we introduce the **five foundational theories or approaches** we believe are essential to creating collaborative networks capable of systems change—systems thinking, network theory, human-centered design, leadership/coaching, and equity—and explain how we integrated them into one program. We also share the I-We-It framework that became shorthand for our theory of change: helping individual leaders ("I") working in networked and collaborative ways ("We") reach the larger goals of systems change ("It").

In building social change networks, though, the who matters just as much as the what. In Chapter 4 we explain the necessity of getting **the right people**—a group that is representative of the community it intends to impact—in the room. How community leaders experience the NLN program largely depends on the people around them: the other leaders participating, the team facilitating the program, and the backbone organization and funder supporting the work. Together, all these groups comprise the full "human container" for the NLN experience. It's important to get all of them right—and ensure they are deliberately diverse across many dimensions.

GET THE WHOLE SYSTEM IN THE ROOM

BUILDING A NETWORK

Each NLN community network comprised 50 to 60 leaders overall—with four discrete "cohorts" of roughly a dozen leaders each launching six to eight months after the other. We believe that putting leaders through an intensive leadership experience over a shorter time frame—and running cohorts every six months rather than every year—allows networks, and communities, to get to a tipping point sooner. The NLN program itself unfolds across the three convenings, each of which has its own purpose and design, with formal gatherings and design team projects happening in between.
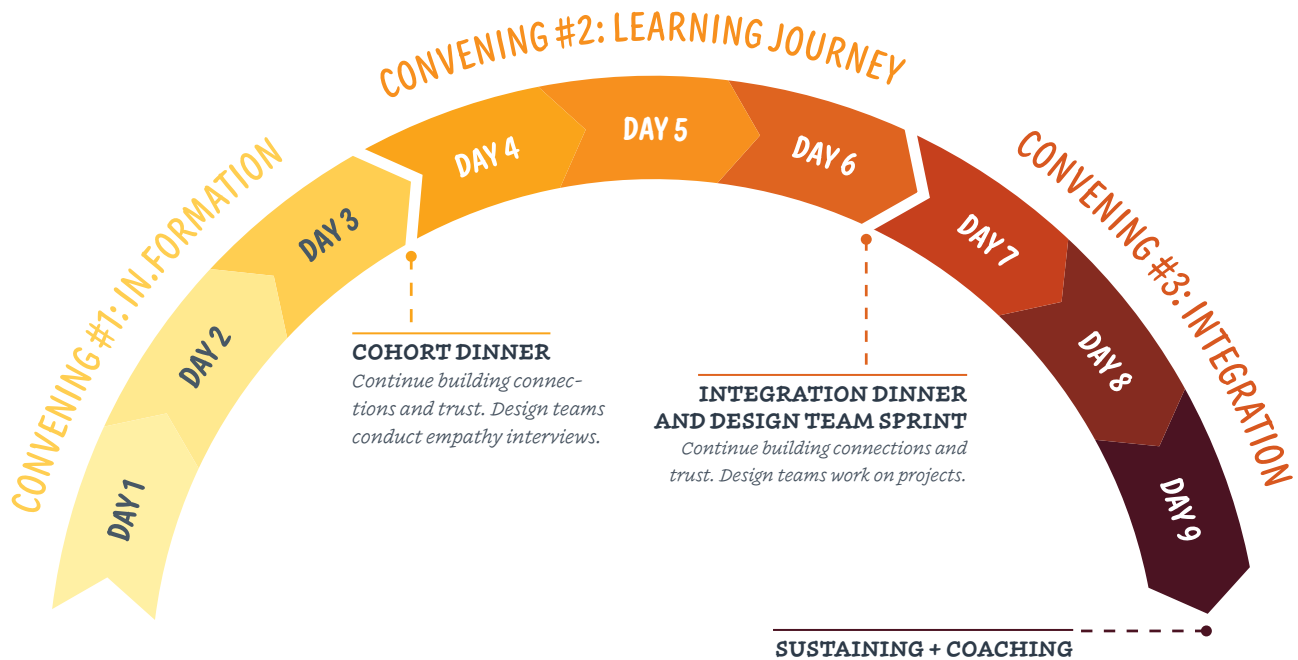
Convening 1 | In.Formation: At a retreat-like setting, participants get to know one another deeply, build trust, and develop empathy to bridge their differences. This convening is intentionally disarming, lifting leaders out of more traditional ways of working and helping them gain new perspective on themselves, one another, and their shared community. The leaders leave this gathering with a new tribe, a more equity-centered perspective, and a focal issue to work on.

Convening 2 | Learning Journey: The second convening offers a different kind of disruptive experience—a three-day learning journey designed to get leaders out of their familiar contexts and expose them to innovative tools and ideas that they can adapt to their work, while continuing to deepen their relationships with one another and beginning to apply human-centered design to local challenges. It's at this convening that each project team designs an innovative community project to be launched before the final retreat.

Convening 3 | Integration: Leaders enter this convening feeling a sense of both accomplishment and new beginnings—of the group having created the space, tools, and relationships that will help them become the systems leaders they wanted to be. Together, leaders explore what lies ahead for the larger NLN network, and how to connect what they have learned back to their work and the larger community.

Critically, we also share what happens next—the often overlooked and underreported work of **embedding and sustaining a network** (Chapter 8). How can the engagement that helps keep a network healthy be supported over time? How do you help members stay connected and productive? Many networks skip this step, offering little support beyond the initial program, and invariably they lose momentum. In the book, we share a set of core elements that we believe help a network to become embedded and sustainable over time—including nurturing network governance, continuing to steward project teams, hosting informal meet-ups, facilitating peer learning, and supporting emerging collaborations.

THE NLN ARC OF LEARNING

CONVENING #2: LEARNING JOURNEY

CONVENING #1: IN.FORMATION

CONVENING #3: INTEGRATION

DAY 1 · DAY 2 · DAY 3 · DAY 4 · DAY 5 · DAY 6 · DAY 7 · DAY 8 · DAY 9

COHORT DINNER
Continue building connections and trust. Design teams conduct empathy interviews.

INTEGRATION DINNER AND DESIGN TEAM SPRINT
Continue building connections and trust. Design teams work on projects.

SUSTAINING + COACHING

CONVENING #1 ▼

DAY 1 — CREATING THE CONTAINER

Orient participants, build connections, and establish trust in the group.

➔ Rituals of Connection: Whose shoulders are you standing on?
➔ Personal Introductions
➔ Community Agreements
➔ Program Orientation

DAY 2 — STORIES TO SYSTEMS

Use participant stories to map and understand larger community systems.

➔ Passion Talks (Part One)
➔ Systems Mapping (Part Two)
➔ *Design Thinking: Gift Giving
➔ *Design Project Scoping

DAY 3 — SYSTEMS TO STORIES

Help participants identify which challenges to address, form design teams, and set personal leadership intentions.

➔ *Empathy Field Guide
➔ Gatekeeping
➔ Moments of Movement: KELP

CONVENING #2 ▼

DAY 4 — WE ARE NOT ALONE

Expose participants to new ideas by meeting leaders in other communities. Reconnect and recommit to intentions.

➔ Site Visits in Host Community
➔ Exchange with Local Leaders
➔ Leader's Stand

DAY 5 — DESIGN DAY

Teach human centered design as an approach to tackling systems challenges.

➔ *Design Project Synthesis
➔ *Improv Exercise: Yes/And
➔ *Prototyping Dashboard

DAY 6 — BRAVERY DAY

Explore equity, power and privilege in the cohort and the larger community.

➔ Leadership Feedback
➔ Equity Fishbowl
➔ Diversity Circles

CONVENING #3 ▼

DAY 7 — RE-DESIGN DAY

Capture learning from the prototypes, and help teams determine future action. Examine team dynamics.

➔ *Design Project Testing
➔ *Design Team Feedback Grid

DAY 8 — INTEGRATION

Help participants integrate their learning and invite others to support their vision.

➔ Personal Network Mapping
➔ Peer Consult
➔ Empowering Questions

DAY 9 — IT'S OVER / NOT OVER

Design the network's future and retell the story of each participants' journey.

➔ Design the NLN Future
➔ Rituals of Connection: What is my NLN story?

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COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS, ENERGIZED LEADERS

Evaluating a local cross-sector leadership network designed to produce results on multiple levels of communities or systems comes with its own set of challenges. In Chapter 9, we give insight into the integrated evaluation we created to assess the progress of both networks. We also document and share the NLN's substantial **impact to date:** both the small and large effects that the program has had on the participants personally, on their ways of working together, on social capital and connectivity, and on the communities in which they live. For example:

■ Within a year of its launch, NLN Fresno members had initiated more than 80 new collaborations, either launching or adding significant momentum to local initiatives designed for systems-level impact—including a kindergarten readiness program in Fresno's low-income neighborhoods, another that aimed to increase third-grade reading proficiency in the city, and a downtown revitalization project that would bring new business and transit-oriented development to the region. Network members also started joining one another's boards, showing up as a unified force at city council meetings, and meeting formally and informally to fuel the network's momentum.

■ Similarly, in Stanislaus County, leaders moved from feeling isolated to feeling part of an energized network of like-minded peers. They began acting on local systems together almost immediately—working to redesign local police cadet training to have more community input; overhauling a government program designed to connect Spanish-speaking parents to childcare support; and collaborating across sectors to help mentally ill homeless individuals who were driving significant healthcare costs receive the support they needed to get off the street.

Finally, recognizing that this work is constantly evolving, we share our emerging lessons, talking frankly about both the challenges and the opportunities of building collective leadership for systems change. We also reflect on how these ideas might be applied to other contexts, calling out the variables that could influence implementation and reflecting on the various ways these ideas, frameworks, and tools can be applied to different situations.

TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Giving leaders the opportunity to think about their own leadership, work at a systemic level, and build relationships across race, class, and sector can create the conditions for transformative change in a community. As we illustrate in the book, leaders in these counties are now stepping into new roles and rising to new challenges. They have formed new connections and are using these to accelerate existing work, innovate new approaches, and collaborate across issues and sectors to get more done—and they are beginning to change the larger systems in which they work and live.

It is our greatest hope that our stories and lessons learned will inspire civic leaders, funders, and other changemakers across the country to embrace leadership for systems change. We have been honored to watch these leaders in California's San Joaquin Valley step out of their silos, embrace new approaches to leadership, and develop a renewed sense of collective power to change their communities. We have seen them tackle entrenched local problems that few communities seem equipped to take on, moving the needle on issues once deemed hopeless. These leaders show us the future of this work but also the future itself: a world in which leaders link their passions, power, and perspectives to form networks committed to advancing the common good. We invite you join in this work, and this larger movement, to transform our world.

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AUTHOR BIOS

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NLN Managing Director and Co-Facilitator | Heather is the co-founder of Open Impact, a social impact advising firm, and a published author, speaker, and consultant with more than 25 years of experience in social change. She is the co-author of the bestselling *Forces for Good, The Giving Code,* and other publications.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Behind this book stands a legion of individuals and organizations without which it never would have happened. We acknowledge them all in more detail on p. ii of the book.

ONLINE RESOURCES

In an effort to keep our resource list dynamic and updated, we have chosen to include it on the NLN website rather than in the book. Please visit: http://newleadershipnetwork.org/tools/ for a more detailed listing of various resources and additional exercises mentioned throughout the book.

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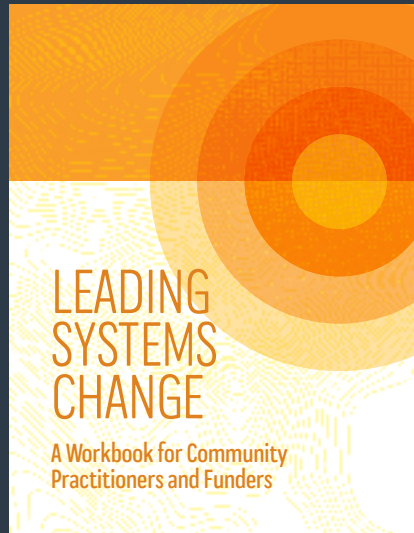
We encourage you to download and
read our full report at newleadershipnetwork.org