

First Relationships. Then Results.

By Stefan Lanfer

MIA IN THE “EFFECTIVENESS” DEBATE – LEADERS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is a lively debate in the nonprofit sector about effectiveness. This has led some to focus on finding and scaling effective organizations. Others are looking to new kinds of cross-sector collaborations with potential for “collective impact.” Both approaches seek to rewrite a familiar story line of isolated gains failing to deliver large-scale change. Yet, both often gloss over a vital ingredient of effective organizations and collaborations – namely, great leaders. As a result, we pay a lot of attention to program models, collaborative processes or ways to measure impact. We pay a lot less attention to what it takes to help great leaders deepen their individual and collective potential.

One recent exception is a case study, “Networking a City,” from the Summer 2012 Stanford Social Innovation Review. Coauthored by Marianne Hughes of Interaction Institute for Social Change and Didi Goldenhar, “Networking a City” argues that great leaders are rejuvenated and collaborative efforts sparked by strong relationships – what is more commonly called social capital. Their focus is the Barr Fellowship. Created by the Boston-based Barr Foundation in 2005, the fellowship aims to celebrate and connect extraordinary leaders in Boston. It includes a three-month sabbatical, group travel to the global south (for example, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Brazil and Haiti) and

the opportunity to join a remarkably diverse network. The authors describe the impact on Boston this way:

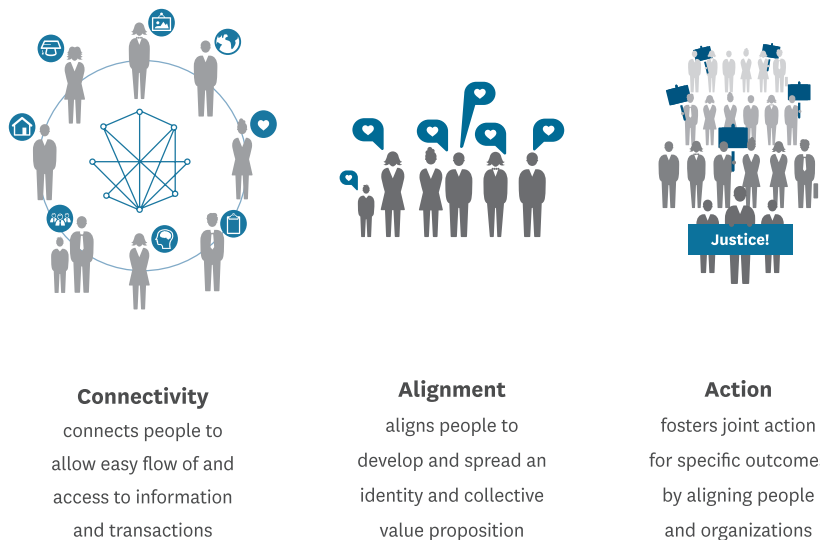
After eight years, the Barr Fellows Network has been the force behind an unexpected series of cooperative efforts among leaders of local nonprofits. It also has confirmed that social change networks are animated not by organizations, but by people. The foundation and its partner in this effort, the Interaction Institute for Social Change, thus shun centralized goals and top-down strategies and have encouraged Barr Fellows to identify and solve problems themselves. The network now numbers 48 fellows. As personal relationships have evolved within and across the first four cohorts, turf-bound com-

petition has given way to what *The Boston Globe* has called “a web of collaboration rippling through the nonprofit community with increasing effect.”

INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUSTING IN EMERGENCE

The Barr Fellowship recognizes great leaders for their contributions to Boston. It is also an investment in their relationships with each other, without set expectations about results. Barr’s decision to focus on weaving a strong network and to be responsive, not directive, about outcomes was grounded in a body of research on networks, including work by Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor, Jane Wei-Skillern and others. Networks come in three types – connectivity, alignment and ac-

FIGURE 1 - Types of Networks

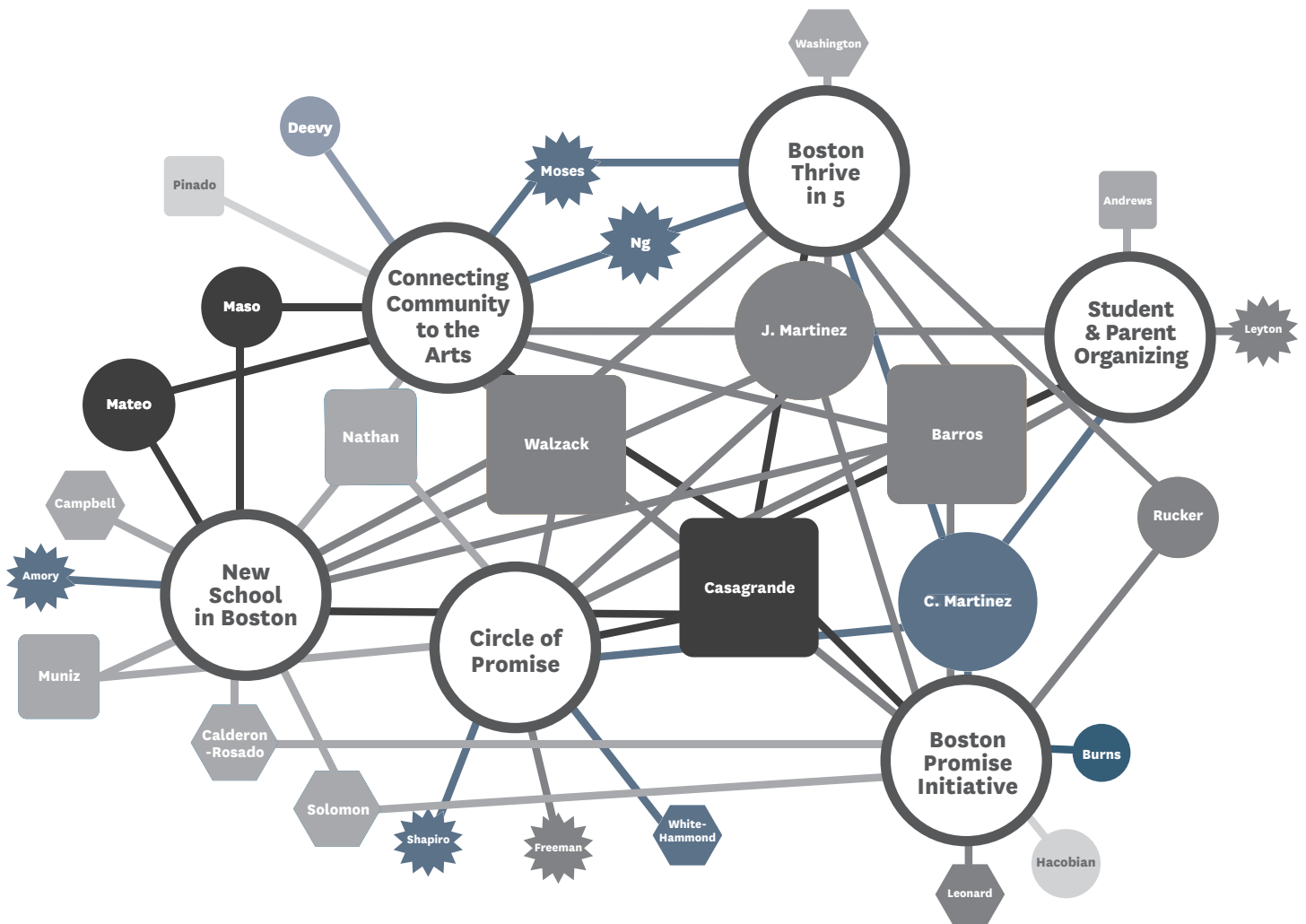


tion (See Figure 1). Understandably, the urgency many feel for outcomes means we often skip to alignment and action. Connectivity, we take for granted. It seems a nice to have, not a must have. Yet, connectivity turns out to be a powerful accelerator and amplifier of every other kind of network activity.

The promise of cross-sector collaborations has natural appeal. Many challenges are bigger than individual organizations. Yet, forging a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts is easier said than done. One limitation is the structure of relationships typically underlying such efforts. Often, these start

when foundations spend grant dollars or elected officials spend political capital to convene stakeholders. This can draw people into orbit around a common goal. In the parlance of network theory, this type of constellation often takes the shape of “hub and spoke.” Like a bicycle wheel, it has a single,

FIGURE 2 - Education Collaborations



Barr Fellows class by shape:

- 2005
- 2007
- ⬡ 2009
- ★ 2011

Sectors by color:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------|
| HOUSING | IMMIGRATION |
| EDUCATION | YOUTH |
| HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES | ENVIRONMENT |
| ARTS & CULTURE | |

powerful center linked to many on its periphery. At their best, such networks organize resources, coordinate activities and get results. But if the center fails, if financial and political capital are exhausted, they often flounder, and gains are not sustained.

For these reasons, Barr and the Interaction Institute for Social Change decided to focus on building a connectivity network, and to create opportunities for disruption and authentic connections. If collaborations emerged, they would follow passions and possibilities that network members discovered on their own.

SKEPTICS WON OVER AS RESULTS EMERGE FROM A MULTI-MODAL NETWORK

Some fellows were initially unconvinced by Barr's insistence that it had no agenda for the network. "I'm a goal-oriented Mr. Fix-It," said Mos-sik Hacobian, a member of the Barr Fellows 2005 class, "and I wanted to have a specific focus. We wanted to see quicker results in Boston. I was skeptical about this grand theory of emergence." Yet, in time, as more collaborative efforts have emerged, skepticism has dissipated.

One example is the Boston Promise Initiative. In a 2008 campaign promise, President Obama pledged to replicate the Harlem Children's zone. In 2010, this became the "Promise Neighborhoods" – a competitive grant program to "design comprehensive approaches for addressing the education and developmental needs of children in distressed, high-poverty communities." When this was announced, several Boston organizations began positioning themselves as lead applicants. Many feared, however, that if Boston produced competing applications, success was unlikely. In the end, one organization emerged as lead – the Dudley Street Neighbor-

hood Initiative, headed by John Barros, a 2007 Barr Fellow. Asked how this happened, Barros explained: "If it weren't for the Barr Fellowship, I don't know how we would have negotiated a single Boston application. There were some difficult conversations that we could get through because of the relationships, the trust and the social capital we built."

Boston's final application was one of 300 from 48 states. Of 21 invited to submit full proposals, Boston's was one of three earning a perfect score. Unfortunately, Boston's full proposal was not among those chosen for implementation grants – at least in the first round. Faced with a similar outcome, a hub and spoke network might have disbanded. Yet, in Boston, the strength of the relationships underlying the effort has propelled the work forward. Timelines and scope have evolved, but work continues. For example, this fall will mark the opening of a new school in the Boston Promise neighborhood – The Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School – a vision made real by John Barros, other fellows and many others working together behind the scenes.

From the beginning, Barr has worked with evaluators to understand how the network is changing and to improve the Fellowship. This has included detailed interviews and network mapping. Figure 2 is drawn from this work. A visual antithesis to a hub and spoke network, it shows tightly woven, interconnected clusters of fellows who have self-organized to collaborate on multiple education-related projects. Barr has similar maps charting collaborations in other areas. The differing shapes represent different fellows classes. Differing shades indicate different sectors. The size of each shape indicates how frequently fellows report getting work-related assistance from each other. Unlike hub and spoke networks, this one

is "multimodal." There is no one center. And this gives the networks resilience. Even when funding is gone and political winds shift, there is still energy to move collaborations forward.

THE POWER OF DISRUPTION FOR BRIDGING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Research by Robert Putnam and Tom Sanders makes the important distinction between two types of social capital – bonding (with others like me) and bridging (across differences). Typically, bonding is easy; bridging is hard. Yet, bridging is also vital. New ideas and new solutions to persistent challenges come from leaders able to transcend silos and "groupthink" of homogenous networks. Bridging is also an essential capacity for urban leaders, who must cross boundaries of race and class to create community. This is what makes the Barr Fellowship so powerful. It is a tightly woven network of bridging connections. Its members are diverse in age, race, sector and geography. Few knew each other before being inducted. The exceptions were those who knew each other from opposite ends of pitched battles over projects, or funding, or politics. Now, they know and trust each other deeply.

How did this happen? In a word – disruption.

The Barr Fellowship begins with a three-month sabbatical. In itself, this is a disruption for leaders, who typically have never had such an opportunity for personal growth and rejuvenation. Yet, from the perspective of social capital, it is critical that each class of twelve fellows spends the first two weeks of their sabbatical traveling together to the global south.

On these "learning journeys," fellows are immersed in experiences that open minds and hearts. They interact with indigenous leaders who, despite scarce resources and great challenges, provide examples that stir the imagina-

tion, inspire and bolster confidence for fellows to achieve what they may never have considered possible. Conversations and connections happen among fellows in many casual and unplanned ways during these journeys. A facilitator from Interaction Institute for Social Change provides structured opportunities to debrief, reflect and imagine together, as well.

Barr has a detailed logic model outlining its thinking for how an investment in disruption translates into positive change for the leaders themselves, their organizations, Boston and even the world. Here is the idea in brief:

- When boundaries are significant, it takes disruption to get to authentic relationships.

- It takes authentic relationships to build trust.
- Only when they have real trust can people bridge across differences.
- When you have a network of gifted leaders bridging across all kinds of differences, powerful change will emerge.

This dynamic is perhaps best expressed in the words of one Barr Fellow, who shared this reflection on his first learning journey:

We were able to open up to each other and state what we thought, what our fears were personally and professionally, where we thought we were going. That was fantastic!

To have someone to whom you can say 'I'll call you at three in the morning,' or 'I'll be over at your house,' or, 'I need some time to debrief, a mental health break,' or 'my spirits are low.' Those are opportunities that were created. You can overcome any obstacle whatsoever if you have someone to fall back on.

To learn more, visit www.barrfoundation.org/fellows. ■

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