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Collaboration

The Need for Cross-Sector Collaboration

Addressing today's most pressing challenges requires developing the capacity to lead collaboratively and to effectively work across sectors.

By [Jeanine Becker & David B. Smith](#) | Winter 2018

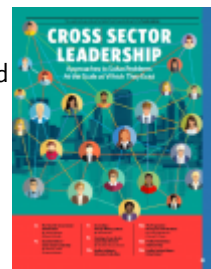
The striking challenges of our time—such as health care, the environment, education, and poverty—are complex, whether on a local, national, or international scale. Yet all too often we approach these issues with **piecemeal and even siloed solutions**, and with efforts (however passionate, intense, and even exhausting) that aren't sufficient to address the problems at the scale at which they exist.

Think, for example, of the challenge that is most pressing to you, and consider the various individuals affected and the systems at play. Can a single policy, however finely crafted, or a social program, however well run, or a new technology, however innovative, by itself solve that problem? Developmental psychologist **Robert Kegan suggests** that in dealing with an increasingly complex world we have two choices. Our first choice is to see the world as simpler. Our second choice is that we can increase the complexity of our own perspective to the extent necessary to meet the challenges. This means that we, as solution seekers, can choose to focus on a piece of the problem and tackle just that piece, or we can engage multiple stakeholders to craft solutions that are complex enough and possess the various perspectives and resources necessary to adequately address the challenges.

While the former can effectively address specific challenges, the latter approach holds the greatest potential for sustainable change in complex challenges at scale. The grand challenges of our time also present a striking opportunity for new processes of cocreating change and new outcomes. In recent years, we have seen increased focus on public-private partnerships, and the rise of complex collaborative structures,

Cross Sector Leadership: Approaches to Solve Problems at the Scale at Which They Exist

This special supplement, sponsored by the [Presidio Institute](#), takes a close look at cross sector leaders: how they are different from other types of leaders, the role that they play in advancing social change, and why they are so important today.



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such as collective impact and pay-for-success models, in pursuit of such change.

In other words, we're seeing the rise of crosssector collaboration—alliances of individuals and organizations from the nonprofit, government, philanthropic, and business sectors that use their diverse perspectives and resources to jointly solve a societal problem and achieve a shared goal.

In this century, society will confront obstacles of unparalleled complexity. Critical issues such as climate change and water scarcity, the widening gap between rich and poor, declining educational outcomes, and cultural conflicts demand our timely attention. Globalization and technology are exponentially increasing the scope, speed, and interrelatedness of our challenges. With that increasing speed come challenges that are more emergent, and so the capacity to quickly iterate and adapt will be even more essential.

The indispensable ingredient in determining whether we overcome our obstacles and seize the opportunity of these times remains the same as it has been throughout history: **leadership**.¹ With the rise in complex, interdependent, and emergent challenges, effective change to secure a brighter future will require transformative, collaborative leaders who can effectively lead cross-sector collaborations.²

Developing as a Cross Sector Leader

Certainly one way for individuals to develop the capacity for cross sector leadership is to shift sectors purposefully as their careers progress—to become, perhaps, a **tri-sector leader**, gaining perspectives, insights, and experience directly from working in each sector. **Earlier writing on collective impact has also suggested focusing on the five traits of an effective backbone leader**—and has encouraged teams to hire for these capacities.

In this supplement, we explore how the capacity to be an effective cross sector leader is not merely the result of moving between sectors or a collection of traits to be hired for, but is the product of a series of mind-sets and skills that can be effectively developed.

Meeting the complexity, interdependence, and emergent nature of our current challenges requires leaders to choose to balance their attention between the people involved in the change effort (including multiple stakeholders) and the results needed to achieve impact. It requires effectively **managing key polarities**, and not falling into the false choice between focusing on a set vision or being adaptive and receptive to input. It requires choosing to be charismatic enough to lead through influence and humble enough to engage a diverse team. And it requires choosing collaboration instead of other means of addressing difference—**such as competing, accommodating, compromising, or avoiding**, precisely because as a style of engaging difference, collaboration requires both our highest degree of agency (our clarity and sustained action toward our own vision and strategy) and our highest degree of compassionate cooperation (our mind set and skills with empathy, curiosity, and focus on the needs of others).

The gift in cross-sector collaboration is that it is possible to use differences as an asset—differences in resources, experience, demographics, industry, and sector, as well as differences in perspective, such as assessments of risk, time, and scale. Cross sector leaders recognize that the most robust and sustainable solutions will come from designing with (and not just for) the communities most affected.

This means that effective cross sector leaders understand the human-centered design approach and engage key stakeholders with empathy, embracing an iterative process. But they go one step further: They have the capacity to map the system and commit to having those most affected at the table as co-designers, addressing critical power dynamics, such that all stakeholders engage with and buy into the co-designed solution.

To do so, cross sector leaders need to be able to address power dynamics effectively, build trust, and help team members address any breaches of the shared culture they are developing.

It is one thing to learn to approach diversity as an asset. But the challenge of cross sector leadership is navigating these differences effectively in the moments that matter most, such as a high-stakes conversation, where a leader will be tested to not merely react but creatively choose to engage. To make these choices when it matters most requires awareness of one's own default behaviors and perspectives—our leadership habits—and the capacity to override that default response as needed.

Research indicates that these sophisticated leadership capacities and the capacity for leaders to choose their responses can be **developed**. My own (Becker) experience, teaching negotiation and collaboration at Stanford University for a decade and coaching purpose-driven leaders on their collaborative leadership capacities to align their team and build the partnerships needed to scale, supports this idea. And the Presidio Institute engaged four cycles of its Cross Sector Leadership Fellowship, teaching the mind-sets and skills of cross sector leadership to fellows over the past four years.

Experience and research shows that to effectively grow these leadership capacities and to shift leadership habits requires **a framework, practice, and awareness** of our default habits, along with the capability to discern and choose creatively in the moment.

Our intention with this supplement is to help you meet that challenge. In these pages, we aspire to provide frameworks, critical questions, and concrete examples that will ignite your awareness and inspire your practice of the mind-sets and skills to increase your cross sector leadership capacity. Indeed, the issues you most care about require it.

Supplement Articles

The first article in this supplement, **“The Essentials of Cross Sector Leadership,”** presents examples of cross sector leadership in action and details a framework, developed by the Presidio Institute, for cross sector leadership: building teams, solving problems, and achieving sustainable

results.

The next article, “[Cocreating a Change-Making Culture](#),” by Community Wealth Partners President Sara Brenner, dives deeper into the need to build trust and develop a changemaking culture. Consistent with the famous Peter Drucker quote, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” Brenner explores how this is also true for change makers, as “Culture is the great accelerant or deterrent for progress because it is complex human beings who make change.”

In this article, Brenner highlights the core components of a change-making culture and makes the case for funders to support not only the strategic and programmatic work of change makers but also the culture building that is necessary for lasting impact.

The third article, by Heather McLeod Grant, “[Creating a Cross Sector Leadership Network](#),” focuses on solving problems. With the financial support of the James Irvine Foundation, Grant and her team developed the cross-sector and place-based Irvine New Leadership Network to address cross-sector challenges in Fresno, Calif.

McLeod and her team analyzed the people most impacted and the systems at play and discovered that the nonprofit leaders on the front lines in Fresno often lacked the power and resources to shift systems by themselves. With that understanding, McLeod and her team adjusted their strategy and developed New Leadership Network to address the need for individual development, build trust among diverse stakeholders, and engage the larger community for systemic impact.

Another example of solving problems by effectively engaging both the people affected and the underlying systems is [the work of Emily May](#). May is cofounder and executive director of Hollaback, a global nonprofit fighting street harassment through online platforms and offline organizing.

The next article, “[The Progressive Resurgence of Federalism](#),” by Lenny Mendonca and Laura D. Tyson, explores the use of state and local governments as critical leverage points to further progressive causes. State and local leaders can utilize their roles and resources effectively through cross-sector collaboration to be the convener, the visionary, the weaver of many stakeholders, and often the funder with the capacity to take proven programs to scale.

We conclude the supplement with two additional profiles. The first is of Siobhan Foley, a FUSE fellow who is leading a cross-sector collaboration in New Orleans to address challenges associated with climate change. [The article](#) explores how Foley chose key leverage points for building momentum for climate action in New Orleans, to enable a quick win, meet a primary concern for local citizens, and build awareness of how individual actions make a difference.

[The last profile](#) is of Oakland, Calif., Mayor Libby Schaaf. Her efforts to create Oakland Promise, a cradle-to-career initiative to dramatically increase the number of Oakland youth completing college, demonstrates three leverage points that a government leader can bring to cross-sector work: embracing the bigness and complexity of systemic challenges in a way that coalesces many

smaller initiatives into systemic change; convening and engaging both grass tops and grassroots in order to design funded and sustainable solutions with the community; and catalyzing local leadership and creativity by providing a clear vision combined with support, mentorship, and freedom to innovate.

Call to Action

- **Are you a business leader** who feels called to use the fast-paced, iterative, and scalable resources at your disposal to make a difference beyond merely the bottom line for your business?
- **Are you a nonprofit leader** who wants to utilize your programmatic expertise and community connections and who is also committed to broader systemic and scalable change than might be possible solely with your organization's programs?
- **Are you a philanthropic leader** who is exploring ways of fostering systemic change by moving beyond funding individual programs and individual organizations to funding systems change?
- **Or are you a government leader** who sees the big picture and is looking to use government resources to combine programs into scalable initiatives that can meet problems at the scale at which they exist?

If you said “yes” to any of these questions, there is a role for you as a cross sector leader. The complex, emergent, and interdependent challenges we face require transformative and collaborative leaders.

By developing their personal and organizational leadership capacities and by engaging with others practicing cross sector leadership (and those who study and chronicle the work), cross sector leaders have an opportunity to explore various approaches and the results they produce, and to utilize shared knowledge to meet the challenges with innovative, sustainable, and scalable solutions.

Notes

1. Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, “[Leadership in a \(Permanent\) Crisis](#),” Harvard Business Review, July-August 2009.
2. Curtis Ogden, “[Roles of Collaborative Leadership](#),” Interaction Institute for Social Change, January 26, 2011.

Jeanine Becker is the founder and managing director of [Co-Lab Leadership Group](#), a consulting and coaching firm empowering purpose-driven leaders to innovate, sustain, and scale their impact by developing the necessary leadership capacities, organizational culture, and collaborative relationships. She is a coach, speaker, and consultant and has been a lecturer in law focused on negotiation and collaboration at Stanford Law School for the past decade. Becker also hosts the podcast [On Purpose Together](#), sharing rich stories and insights by, and for, leaders leveraging collaboration for impact—including leaders profiled in this supplement.

David B. Smith helps people and organizations turn good intentions into greater impact through partnerships and multi-stakeholder collaborations. He was the managing director of the [Presidio Institute](#) from 2013 to 2017 and

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