

COHORT PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

When we embarked upon this project almost three years ago (January 2018), the goal was to provide the Jim Joseph Foundation with a guide for effective practices in leadership development programs with a specific focus on leadership journeys and critical inflection points where cohort-based programs or other experiences could be especially valuable. This guide was to build upon two prior reports, one outlining key aspects from the literature on leadership development and learning experiences in the Jewish sector, and another report detailing our findings from the interviews conducted ([LINK TO THESE HERE](#)). Until a few months ago, our intent was to complete this project with the publication of a guide to inform the development of cohort-based programs, focusing on what was most useful for participants and drawing on insights gleaned from more than 80 interviews with highly successful Jewish social sector leaders.

Obviously, a lot has changed in 2020. However, as we reoriented ourselves to the profound impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on professional development and to the unique forms of leadership needed to navigate societal challenges such as growing racism and anti-Semitism, we realized that many core elements of our initial findings still held true, whether we were considering in-person programming or fully virtual events. Moreover, we quickly realized that many of the leadership development benefits derived from cohort-based programs were exactly the types of skills and experiences necessary to both navigate this challenging and disruptive time and envision the future of Jewish leadership development that contributes to a more just world.

Over the last several months, we have reworked our findings and this guide to focus more explicitly on what is so catalytic about cohort-based programs and identify underlying elements that can and should persist, regardless of the method of delivery. In many cases, the information shared here is applicable across sectors, not just the Jewish social sector. As we sought to expand our discussion to networked leadership, we also draw on our experiences with programs outside of the Jewish sector and our leadership development expertise more broadly. Thus, this report is grounded in our latest understanding of fostering interdependent leadership within and across sectors – particularly collaborative, networked leadership toward a more equitable and just society – and is contextualized with the experiences of our interviewees and what they found to be developmentally critical parts of their leadership experiences.

In the guide that follows, we focus on core developmental experiences for leaders, how the context of cohort-based programs uniquely supports them, and the importance of developing a larger network that will support leaders beyond a single program or initiative. We encourage readers to reflect on how these elements manifest in the Jewish world and what specific opportunities exist within the Jewish social sector to mobilize around these insights with more agility and connectedness than might be possible in other sectors.

INTRODUCTION:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE NETWORKS

Cohorts as Network “Seeds”

Our primary intention for this document was that it would serve as a guide for professionals who design and deliver cohort-based leadership development programs serving the Jewish social sector, as well as be a helpful point of reference for conversations with program funders, operators/designers, evaluators, and people outside of the Jewish social sector. However, as we took a step back to look across our findings throughout this project, we realized that the value of the cohort experience was inextricably linked to the *network* it helped create. Thus, we focus this guide more intentionally on **cohort program design elements that drive the creation of a purposeful, powerful network of leaders**. We firmly believe that networked leadership¹ is the future of leadership for the social sector, and this guide focuses on how cohorts can help build networks and provide valuable learning experiences for practicing networked leadership skills.

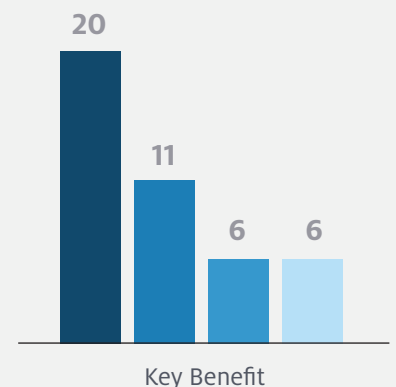
Two critical notes: we focus on cohort-based programs but do not presume that cohorts are the only place where the elements discussed in this report should be considered. In fact, the core elements are likely applicable across leadership development program types, but the cohort provides a useful lens for deeper examination. Second, we believe that networked leadership is critical across the social sector, which includes the Jewish social sector. While the Jewish social sector presents unique opportunities to ground these principles within a specific set of cultural teachings, learnings, and history, we assume there is a significant overlap between the needs of the Jewish social sector and the social sector in the US more generally.

We are referring to networks as the collective of meaningful connections that bring individuals together to support a common purpose. Networking, unlike what you might traditionally think of as something that (perhaps) awkwardly happens at conferences, is the strategic use of building relationships that serve multiple purposes: sharing information and resources, collaborating on activities or interventions, offering trust and support, providing sources of deep learning and personal transformation. Network leadership is the ability to cultivate and strategically leverage networks to achieve a shared goal or outcome.

When designing cohort programs, it is important to understand the potential role of cohorts in developing networks that can exponentially increase a program's impact. For example, from the perspective of program participants, becoming connected to an alumni network can effectively extend the duration of a program indefinitely. In fact, in our follow-up survey of interview participants, the network was the highest reported benefit of their program experience. By maintaining a connection with others in their cohort or alumni network, they gain access to ongoing developmental learning experiences through peer mentoring, accountability partnerships, thought partnership, knowledge exchange, and collaboration. In recognition of the immeasurable benefit these networks can provide to individuals, we are presenting elements of cohort program design that make network development their primary goal. However, we do not presume that the network within the program is the only network worth focusing on or the most critical network in terms of driving the advancement of the sector. Therefore, we also focus on how cohort-based

REPORTED TOP BENEFITS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN THE JEWISH SECTOR

- Network
- Leadership Development
- Prestige
- Mentorship



programs provide a critical practice space for the types of skills needed to further network development beyond the program, whether in communities or across organizations.

This guide is the third report in the Center for Creative Leadership's ongoing Cross-Portfolio Research Study on leadership development in the Jewish social sector, which was commissioned by the Jim Joseph Foundation and began in 2018. Sources of data for our research include leadership development research and best practices, interviews with more than 80 successful Jewish leaders, surveys, program observation, evaluations, and emerging thought in Jewish leadership discourse, philanthropy, and other topics. Based upon that research, combined with the experience and knowledge CCL has across the social sector, this guide identifies key points to elements of design that help cohort programs create transformational learning experiences with the potential to support leaders in numerous ways over the course of a lifetime.

Each of these design elements can be beneficial to a program, but in concert they make it possible for programs to catalyze the formation of enduring networks. This represents a critical shift in the work of cohort program design. **The emphasis is no longer solely on the individual leader experience – equally important is the way that programs can “seed” networks that will take on a life of their own**, grow and adapt as contexts change, and bring about agility and change within the fields or sectors they serve. The focus is no longer bringing a group of leaders together only to experience something at the same time but that is largely unique to their needs. Rather, we argue that the focus should shift toward considering cohort-based programs as a microcosm of sector relationships in which critical issues can be tackled and critical skills developed. With such a shift also comes a subsequent reimagining of the relationships of participants, funder/operators, evaluators, and others involved in the development and support of these experiences, and how we understand and measure program success, as we discuss further below.

“I think that the networks and the relationships over time are a big deal and we need money and systems to put those in place. ... We need to all – those of us who have similar vision, we need to band together, we need to get together, we need to have time to spend with each other. ... The cohorting, I just can’t say enough about the power of the cohort. Just about everything that I’ve done in my own professional development and then what I try to lead, is related to traveling together and studying together and reflecting together. So, we need more of those opportunities, so that it’s just networks on networks on networks. Because it really works.”

Note: All sidebar quotes in this report are derived from interview transcripts with 80+ leaders in the Jewish social sector.

