

ESTABLISHING AND TENDING TO TRUST



The challenges facing Jewish social sector leaders today are complex and will require deeper ways of working with one another. **Programs that build relationships able to evolve, challenge, and support one another are critical to supporting the well-being and success of the leaders and network.**

One element of cohort programs that we heard about over and over in our interviews was the critical role that trust played in the strength and bonding of the cohort. Trust is also a critical element for network-based work. **Effective collaboration hinges on trust, and the complex challenges that leaders face require specific attention on trust-building.** This is particularly true for efforts related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).

Trust exists at the interpersonal or dyadic level of relationships between people. Psychological safety is a related construct that exists at the group level (though its perceptions are measured at the individual level), and is defined as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking”.¹¹ Psychologically safe teams, organizations, and networks accept risk and failure, thereby encouraging individuals to try new skills, behaviors, and ways of thinking and working. Thus, both components are important elements of trust that exist in terms of individual perceptions, interpersonal behaviors, and group-level climate.

While in some program designs, collaboration toward a larger goal can foster relationships and build trust, in other efforts, such as EDI or programs where diverse leaders are intentionally brought together, trust and relationships may need to be built before collaboration can happen. Often we presume that working together on a project will result in people building connections with one another, without considering that the opposite may be true, especially with regard to social identities. Social identities refer to the ways we understand and label the groups that we belong to, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, etc.¹² Our identities inform our beliefs and behaviors in the world, and the contexts we are in are sometimes welcoming or threatening for various aspects of our social identities. **Individuals may need to trust that they will be able to bring their whole, authentic self to the program and be received fully before they are able or willing to invest the level of effort required to collaborate and learn.** This is particularly true for efforts that intend to span faith, where beliefs and behaviors may create differing views or priorities.

In-depth, multi-session programs are especially good opportunities for creating a “third space” – a space in which individual cultural capital and experiences merge with content and application – where participants are able to reconceive of their selves and ways of being in the world and work collectively to envision how they and their network could inform the future.¹³ Understanding the role that trust will play, and what your participants will need in order to trust each other, and trust the facilitator, is a critical element of program design that cannot be overlooked. In fact, it may be the most important aspect of all. Moreover, understanding how the trust created in the program depends on the sense of psychological safety and, indeed, will fuel or undermine the resulting psychological safety of the entire network, is a critical aspect.

“The third one has to do with moving the field to a place where they really understand what our role is to play in the ecosystem and the way Jews both help advance and the way Jews also sometimes impede the progress that we could have. And one of the things that we’re learning is there are a lot of skills we need to develop now and a lot of understandings we need to develop that we haven’t figured out. ... Because over the years, I’ve seen a lot about how we talk about speaking truth to power, but the hardest thing is to speak truth to peers because our peers put back on us, we want to please our peers, we want to be included by our peers. So, how do we all learn to push each other enough so that we really have the growth that we need to live in these coalitions that are both multifaith, multiracial, this new world we’re in where we both have to contribute our talents, but also learn to censure leadership on people most impacted. And how do we actually, within our Jewish community, really embrace what we can learn from the Jews of color who are really rising in power and influence in the Jewish community, and also struggling to shift the narrative and be in a different type of relationship with their white brothers and sisters.”



Integrating Trust and Content

For funders, operators, and designers, a commitment to trust and trust-building requires navigating a mindset around content and delivery (discussed further below). It is very tempting for designers to fill programs full of specific content (and for funders to expect to see many elements of program content to signal that the investment was worth it). However, **content at the expense of relationship building can undermine program impact**. Signaling to participants the importance of trust and relationship-building, often at the perceived “expense” of content, has been a key learning in CCL’s own journey. **Trust-building and content should not be seen as mutually exclusive elements of design**. Rather, aspects of trust building and the creation of psychological safety exist across many aspects of leadership development (e.g. boundary spanning leadership).

Trust and psychological safety are levers for effective leadership development experiences. When present, they amplify the experience, underscore the relevance of the content, and allow participants to take risks and try new behaviors. Trust underlies authentic learning experiences and effective facilitation and taking the time to build it, so that everyone can show up fully, can be challenging for facilitators and designers who are used to covering a specific set of content skills or modules and only focus on checking those boxes. More importantly, **when trust is overlooked as the foundation of the program or experience being built, it will inevitably create issues that may undermine the goals and impact of the program**.

Moreover, trust between participants is only one aspect of trust and vulnerability required in these types of programs. Another sometimes overlooked aspect is trust between the cohort and the facilitator, and even program staff. This trust flows both ways and is interdependent. **In today’s leadership learning environments, facilitators are no longer the presupposed experts who exist to deposit knowledge into leaders. Learning is multidirectional – from facilitator to participants and vice versa, and between participants**. While participants likely expect some expertise from the facilitators, the primary responsibility of the facilitator in trust-based experiences is to “curate” a learning environment that allows for co-creation of meaning around the content presented.

Participants will often voice their needs and concerns or push back on topics, models, or content areas. How the design and facilitation team(s), operators, and funders respond to this can signal several things to participants: the level of trust that the designer/funder has in them; the level of vulnerability the designer/funder is willing to share; and the way that power will be negotiated through the program experience. **If a central outcome of a leadership development program is to impact a field or address a complex social challenge, and if the program is intended to provide applied learning toward building networked leader competencies, then the design has to allow for participants to flex their voice, skills, and power**. If, for some reason, the design is wholly inflexible, transparency will be absolutely critical or else trust can be diminished.

“Well, I think they have the power not only to convene, but to create an environment, short term environment, that would feel less risky to people, taking people away to a neutral place, having no report afterwards, having a skilled and outside external facilitator of conversation. I think there are ways of using their convening power to get people to come, and then creating spaces which people could have conversations that would be beyond their imagination.”



A key avenue for establishing trust and supporting psychological safety is the way in which the program facilitator role is defined and experienced. Program designers and facilitators do not have to be the official content experts. **From an EDI perspective, it is critical that designers center the leaders in the cohort as experts and the role of the facilitators as working to create a container and provide tools to help them reflect and do their work most effectively.** Program facilitators play a key role in establishing trust and modeling behaviors that build trust. They should show what skills and background they bring to the room and purposefully help others feel that they belong and feel included. Facilitators can be transparent about the ways they are also striving to grow as a leader in the way they will ask participants to strive. Being real, authentic, and vulnerable presents a modeling opportunity so that participants can follow their example to engage with the group with authenticity and vulnerability. Transparency around the challenges you face and the ways that your learnings and relationships with the participant leaders are informing your own practice will help build authentic connection.

Also with regard to EDI, we have seen that trust-building becomes more complex when we consider the role of “ally” behaviors.¹⁴ The term “ally” is often used problematically in that it is frequently a label individuals may claim to feel better about their place and privilege but without doing critical work that minoritized groups see as true allyship. Therefore, we emphasize that ally is a verb and not a noun – it consists of taking action to address systemic inequalities. We define “ally” in this context in terms of a person with privilege who leverages their power in pursuit of addressing issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. While it may be easy to conflate trust-building with being nice, warm, and accommodating to participants, it cannot come at the expense of challenging conversations or through avoiding conflict when difficult topics arise. In those instances, modeling trust may involve “calling in”¹⁵ (as opposed to ‘calling out’) a participant who uses offensive language, which helps signal to participants that you are willing to put in the labor and use your position as facilitator to correct, educate, and model. Doing so in a way that does not alienate participants is the challenge.

Trust is therefore a critical component of inclusive leadership and requires continuous action and reinforcement to build and maintain. Vulnerability, and a willingness to admit that true collaboration will involve mistakes, is a powerful network skill that facilitators can model through their practice. Funders should look for providers of leadership development experiences who understand this fundamental idea, and view skilled facilitation of the group as more important than unilateral delivery of content. And, when working together, funders and providers can allow for the vulnerability and redesign necessary to truly meet the needs of the participants, and therefore their communities and the larger network.

...Leadership requires courage, and not everyone feels equipped to act skillfully with courage and to be willing then to take the risk that might in fact be necessary because we haven't yet strengthened our risk-taking and courage muscles in the way that I believe is all eminently very learnable. And [with our organization] each one of these decisions has and had controversy around them, and each one of the decisions ultimately if, you know, if I and we come back to why we exist as an organization and what we're trying to do in the world meant that we took a course of action that was really reflective of our DNA in many ways, and, though, it also involved significant points of conflict and tension with members of our own community as well as just—like—none of those choices have been easy choices to make, but I think that they are, they have been critical choices to make.