

## DELIVERING POWERFUL CONTENT



As mentioned above, a central challenge for program designers is the pressure to balance delivery of content that covers specific areas or modules that may be important to funders and operators with delivering an experience that feels valuable, relevant, and applicable to all participants, who are likely entering the program with different needs and expectations. The aforementioned point that, in the most transformative leadership development experiences, facilitators' key function is to create a space and hold a container for the participants' expertise to flourish and grow, is a helpful reminder here.

### **Cohort design for networked leadership requires a step-back to understand the bigger picture and goals of the cohort developmental experience.**

Relationships hold extremely high value in the intense experience of cohort-based programs and short-changing the relationship-building in favor of content delivery can undermine the strength and longevity of the network.

Within leadership development, we know that learning happens both within and outside of the classroom. Through our 70-20-10 model, we have found that learning happens primarily through challenging assignments (70%), developmental relationships (20%), and coursework and training (10%).<sup>19</sup> Networked leadership challenges this notion, because the assignments often require relationship building that becomes developmental and transformative.

This is a particularly relevant frame considering the previous suggestions around intentional selection for what the program or network needs to accomplish within the community and the facilitative role of the designer/deliverer. Rather than ask what content needs to be covered within the single category of coursework or training, more generative questions for designers and funders are:

- *What skills do these leaders need to develop or enhance to be more effective at creating the changes they seek?*
- *What experiences will enable leaders to practice new and critical skills?*
- *How do we provide the safe space, adaptive mindsets, and important skillsets and toolsets to help them get there?*

When we move from content to skills, from what to how, we expand our understanding of what leadership development can and should do, and we approach learning from a more facilitative, curative mindset as opposed to a didactic delivery model. We weave together assignments within the context of a program that build on a small piece of focal content and provide opportunity for building relationships and skills.

This is not to say that content is irrelevant. Content is still critical (especially content specific to network leader competencies, see below), but designers are forced to get to the crux of what is important about the content and allow space for application. This is especially true in virtual or hybrid settings. Considering the cohort as a microcosm of relationships and challenges that leaders encounter in the world, what greater opportunity exists than to have a reflective, focused, supported experience attempting to apply learnings in real-time? The support of facilitators, peers, professional coaches, and powerful feedback and data can open a leader to practicing new behaviors in a safe environment. Content that cannot or will not be leveraged through application may be extraneous to the ultimate goals of the program.

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*“This point about not just building intensive things that reach a few people very deeply. ... It’s such a blessing to be able to offer that much to people, to give them these really intense experiences, and I really feel like it leaves a lot of people out because a) it’s expensive and does not reach that many people, B) because a lot of people just won’t be able to say yes. ... So rather than be negative about it, to be positive about it, the more different kinds of options we can offer people – light touch, medium touch, high touch, intensive, not so intensive, ongoing but on video – you know, the more we can try to really understand the diversity of the audience that we’re trying to reach and the different constraints on their ability to participate the better.”*

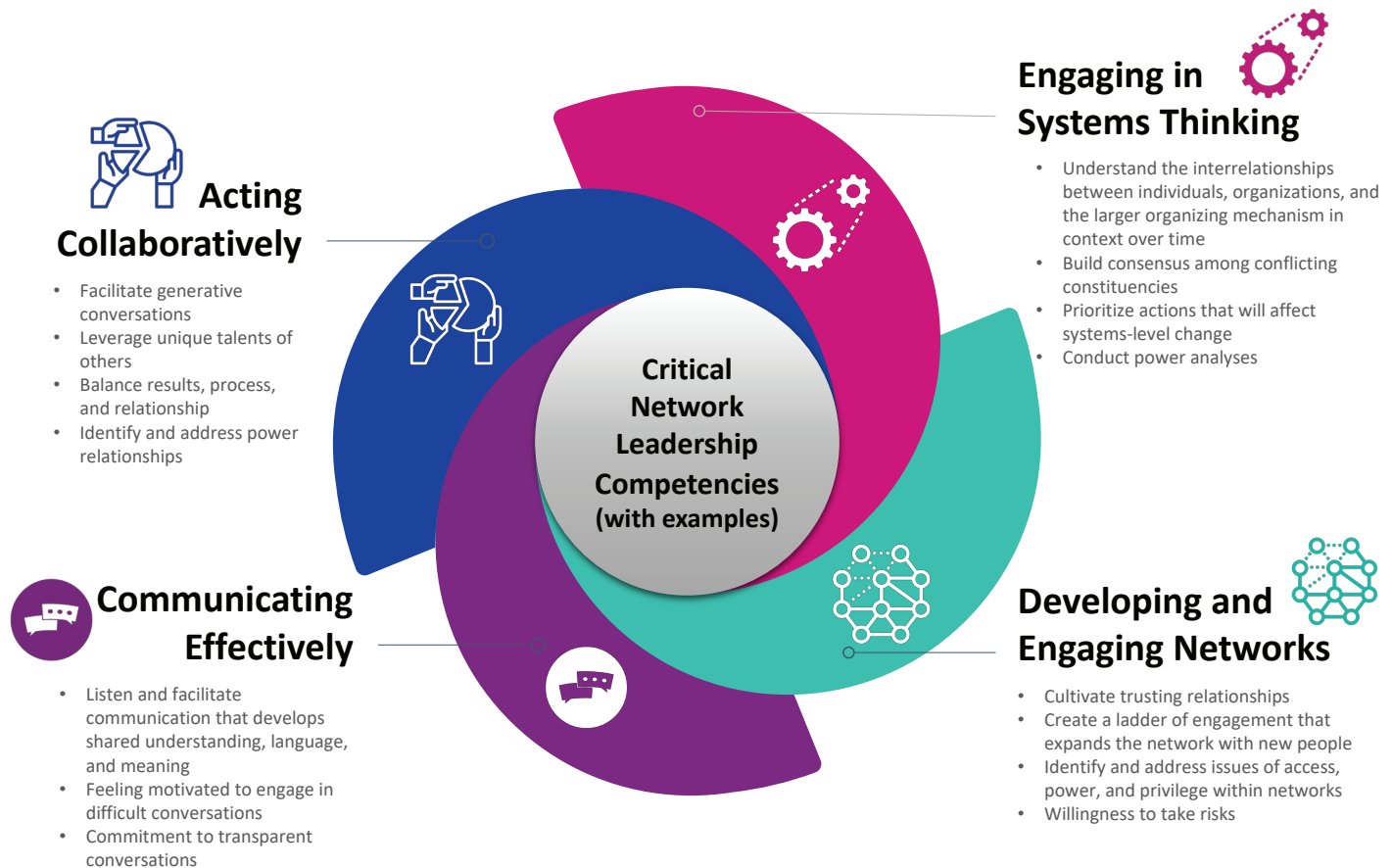


## Prioritize Content Specific to Networked Leadership Competencies

There is an endless amount of leadership development content that can be covered in any sort of program. **While our overall argument is that process is more important than checking the box on any one aspect of content delivery, there are some leadership development competencies that should be prioritized as focus areas.** When working with networks, success must depend upon leadership, not authority. Helping participants to understand that what their leadership looks like in a complex, ever changing, informal network of people, organizations, ideas, challenges, and opportunities is necessary. As stated earlier, acting in (or with/through/for) networks is emphatically not about the sometimes shallow and transactional encounters or exchanges that are often called “networking.”

**We have found several competencies to be critical for networked leadership: acting collaboratively (interdependence and co-creation); engaging in systems thinking; developing and engaging networks (inspiring movements, building consensus, making (or breaking) connections); and communicating effectively.** Program content that focuses on these skills and their core behaviors, and provides participants with the opportunity to build the skills while applying their learning (ideally toward field-level challenges) can be an extremely effective use of limited program delivery time while building the skills most necessary to have transferrable impact beyond the specific program.

*“And so, I think that interdependent, I think shared, I think more horizontal, I think more network is probably what it ought to look like in the future. But there are too many people who are like vying for the hubs of those networks and who are jealous of that person for getting the grant or that person for getting the award and all this kind of stuff and not enough people who are willing to share. Like in the Jewish world—to get back to the philanthropic portion—there’s no shortage of resources. That can never be the problem. Ego? Probably a bigger problem.”*





## Tailor Content to Cohort Specifics

**One key opportunity related to determining content to include or omit, that is often overlooked, is the value of discovery and data collection prior to program kickoff.** While the funder/operator and designer may have expertise and insight from their point of view, understanding the leadership challenges that participants face – the ones that are *really* getting in the way of their work, or in the way of their network building – can be informed through relatively simple data collection. For example, in some of our programs we have incorporated the use of baseline social network mapping to reveal existing connections and existing isolations or silos and brought that information into the classroom so that designers could strategically foster connections (through projects or breakout sessions) and relationship building experiences. In other programs we have leveraged short measures of trust or culture to provide the participant with a snapshot of data specific to their team or organization, which helps the content be more relevant and applicable as they consider what they should apply to address their specific weak spots or leverage their existing strengths.

A hallmark of effective experiential learning is a shift from instruction to facilitation and curation. As discussed previously, this can be incredibly challenging for program designers (and funders) to shift their focus to creating an engagement that builds relationships and experiences over content.

**Gathering data and incorporating it into design is one way that decisions around content can be more focused and grounded in the specific needs of cohort members.** It is also a way of collaborating at the start, potentially establishing trust, and building buy-in or deepening commitment if the buy-in is already there.

As mentioned previously, **the specific developmental needs of participants should also be factored into the decisions regarding content.** When the developmental needs vary widely, it can be challenging to offer a meaningful experience for everyone. This is an opportunity for designers to consider the chance for relationship building through peer-coaching or peer-mentoring across developmental needs. It can also be an opportunity for differentiation within program design, whether through different breakout groups or tracks within the program geared toward different developmental needs. This is a particularly important consideration when programs combine leadership development content with technical assistance, where participants may be entering from varying levels of technical experience. At its core, most leadership development content can be applicable across experience levels. Technical skills may be more challenging to both assess and design for. Yet, **gaps in technical skills could present interesting opportunities for leveraging the network within the classroom or cohort and potentially even expanding the network beyond the classroom, by bringing in strategic partners to build capacity around certain technical skills** (such as fundraising or budget management) and, by doing so, seeding future network connections.

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*Interviewer: Do you see that there are certain values or commitments or collective practices that are needed to advance the field of Jewish education more broadly?*

*“[Similar] to what I said earlier around it being a value to bring an analysis that takes into account the ways in which people experience both power or privilege and disenfranchisement or marginalization. So a sensitivity to those issues and understanding that, of course, those dynamics play out in the Jewish community, a commitment to our communities really being representative of who Jews are in America and if your community isn’t 10% to 20% people of color or 10% LGBTQ people, etc., to recognize that there are people who are choosing not to show up because your community hasn’t been sufficiently welcoming to them and to relate to inclusion as a value both in and of itself in terms of honoring the experience and identities of people of multiple identities and in terms of what powerfully inclusive Jewish community is a stronger, more vibrant community and how that is, therefore, better for all of us.”*



## Reflect on Content and Power

It is also critical to acknowledge the way that the positioning and prioritization of content within programs serves as an avenue for communicating power in terms of the funder—participant—designer/operator relationship. While this is a critical reflection for any program addressing social justice issues or community leadership, **we argue that a reflection on power through content is actually a key EDI lens that all programs should examine, particularly programs focusing on networked leadership.**

Power manifests with regard to content in both what is presented and how it is presented. For the what, power resides in what content, what speakers, what instruments are given time and space in the classroom. The history of those instruments, how they have been used, whose voices they have excluded or whose experiences they have privileged are all important considerations. Positioning content such as assessments or leadership models as “the” way versus “a” way can be detrimental to program impact. Positioning it as “the” way implies that the path of expertise in the program is from facilitator/funder to participant. Networked approaches inherently require a different path. **Positioning content as “a” way, something that participant leaders can leverage depending on their context, implies that the path of expertise resides within the leaders** (or cohort, network, or community), and that it is up to them to determine their consumption and application (or rejection) of the content.

Moreover, positioning program content as sacred or immovable can actually be traumatic. For example, if funders, operators and designers have practiced intentional selection, brought together less “traditional” leaders, or are bringing in community practitioners, then it is likely that the room will be primarily composed of people who have not experienced the usual privilege associated with formal leadership roles and other social demographics. This may be one of the first times these individuals have been in a funder-supported space intentionally focused on their development and with the goal of amplifying their individual and collective voice. Program designers have to recognize that prior experiences, oppression, and trauma will surface. In fact, they *should* surface if the aforementioned stage setting for vulnerability has been prioritized. The healing work required will likely manifest, and **programs that are unable to adapt to allow for healing may inadvertently retraumatize participants.** Thus, a very fine tension exists for funders, operators, and designers to navigate – creating the conditions for healing work that also allows a network and community to be envisioned anew, through new skillsets, mindsets, and behaviors. When given space and attention, this trauma and healing work can then be translated by funders, operators, and designers into other work across the ecosystem by understanding ways that current programs or initiatives may be exclusionary or unwelcoming, so that participants do not continue to be put into spaces where they do not feel a sense of belongingness.

**How content is presented becomes a delicate balance of structure and adaptability and is especially challenging in longer-term multi-session programs.** The arc of a learning journey may be established at the start of the program, but as network factors and contexts change, the learning plan may

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*“I do think it’s a problem because I think it also shows like what’s valued and what isn’t and there’s a certain denigration of work on the ground, and a certain idealization of like executive leadership. And I think not everyone should be an executive. Some people should just be those amazing program managers. So, I think part of it is just how we conceptualize that, just in terms of like reputation and recognition and payment. Like I think for a lot of people, it becomes kind of both a prestige thing and a financial thing. Like, okay I’m going to leave the work I love but there will be these other benefits. But I think also ensuring that we’re elevating the right people, the people who have the capacity to be mentors and lead others, because I think that’s a very different capacity than doing certain other kinds of work. And I think some people are really attuned to that and some people are not.”*



have to be adapted. **How the opportunity for feedback and adaptation is built into the design of the content signals to participants where power will reside.** Clearly, this is a challenge that could, at worst, pit program designers and participants against funders/operators if the participants feel strongly that they are not getting what they need, yet the funder/operator is placing specific demands on the design and delivery team. Therefore, it is helpful to keep the ultimate goal at the forefront of everyone's minds. Adding a lens of power helps with this. If the ultimate goal is to ignite a network that will catalyze social change, the impact of the program has to extend and persist beyond the funder or the singular programmatic learning experiences. Considering how framing, inclusion, application, and flexibility will play into the design in order to meet the needs of this specific group of leaders in this specific network can shift the focus to assessing and designing for true network needs versus box-checking of content.

### **Design for the Microcosm of the Network...(and be ready to adapt)**

"Emergent Strategy" utilizes ecological and biological principles, such as fractals, to explain relationships and networked leadership. Author Adrienne Maree Brown writes that<sup>20</sup> "Emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies... In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts. Existence is fractal—the health of the cell is the health of the species and the planet." A fractal is the smallest element of a system that repeats itself to create the larger whole (a classic example of a fractal is a snowflake). Emergent strategy provides an incredibly useful lens for viewing the potential of cohort-based programs geared toward creating field-level or systemic change, and how these will (and must) adapt over time.

**Shifting our mindset to think of cohort-based leadership development experiences as opportunities to "seed" a new network, or connect existing networks, changes our understanding of what needs to happen during the program experience in order to enable the network to grow and evolve beyond the program.** In large part, this may involve letting go. Letting go of an established design, letting go of goals that are not grounded in the community, and letting go of assumptions mired by power or bias. And, while program designers and facilitators may be ready and willing to completely abandon one program component in favor of an emergent path from the participants, program funders must also exercise trust in the process and be flexible in their expectations around specific content (see below re: evaluation).

The societal challenges that surround participants as they enter their program experiences are so intense and consuming that they require special attention and adaptability on behalf of program designers. Understanding that program sessions offer a structured, facilitated, and scaffolded opportunity to build relationships and learn content in ways that can be dissected, scrutinized, and improved helps us shift to exploring what experiences in relationship building participants need to become better network leaders. It also helps redefine mindsets and power relationships between participants, funders, operators, and designers in ways that, ideally, can continue to impact the network beyond the program.

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*"I mean, it's funny, so much of the attention of Jim Joseph and other foundations have put on leadership has led to this like—you know, this sort of reunification of the concept I think and a kind of fetishization of good leaders. Like who are they and how do we replicate them? Let's get in the brains of Gloria Steinem and see if we can create tons of Gloria Steinems. And so you end up that you create more people who think they're leaders—There's probably one [program] per...I mean, in Jewish education alone there's probably like one for every seven Jewish educators, right? And some people go through multiple ones. So, the problem is that now we have all these leaders, but no one is following them."*