REDEFINING PRESTIGE

Cohort-based leadership development programs often come with a certain level of cache. Successful applicants are often given a title of "fellow" and this often has deep meaning, both personally and within the community. This is important to consider because identity is an extremely powerful motivator. The ways that we claim certain aspects of our selves or understand our ways of being in the world all inform our identity. Many programs function by offering a new collective identity to participants: "Program Fellow". That identity may have cache in certain circles, may garner additional funding, and provide access to spaces where decisions are made. The power of this identity in turn conveys prestige to the funder (and potentially even the implementation partner), as more and more people seek to be part of the program and, upon leaving the program, go out to do amazing things and attribute some of their success to the program.

Yet, while the identity may be extremely powerful *within* the cohort, it can be problematic in the broader network. Self-promotion can actually be toxic to networks.[21] Prestige at the individual level often invokes competition, resource hoarding or other forms of gate-keeping. Even the recruitment process for highly selective programs itself, referenced above, can create their own ingroup and outgroup phenomena that are not helpful to the funder's overall intent or to the health of the overall network or community where the participants serve.

So, **a fundamental challenge to network-focused cohort-based leadership development programs becomes redefining prestige as a shared attribute, and accepting that our traditional understanding of prestige may be short-lived in emergent networks.** Igniting a shared collective identity may be one avenue for redefining prestige. Changing the meaning of what prestige looks like and what is expected in exchange for prestige may be another.

Foster a New Collective Leader Identity

The shared experience of the program and entry into the larger network can ignite new collective identities, presenting an opportunity to redefine what it means to be a "fellow" of a program. Collective identities are group-based identities that we claim that offer an organizing framework for our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They can be made more salient based on the contexts in which we find ourselves and, more importantly, they can be mobilized for collective action. For example, one may claim roles or identities like homeschooling mother, nonprofit professional, or feminist, and those identities may offer a broader community of support, understanding, or action. While one may individually identify as a leader, identifying as a member of a network-based leadership development program – one focused on solving issues that extend well beyond the program – offers a more clear collective identity that one can join.

Cohort-based leadership development programs present an opportunity to redefine the collective identity of "fellow" in a way that can be more purposefully leveraged for the benefit of the network. For example, it could be established as part of the program that an element of the prestige comes from how the current participants will use that privilege to help and elevate others in their network – the antithesis of hoarding resources or gatekeeping.

"I wish that we could transform from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset. … A scarcity mindset looks at [70 to 80 percent intermarriage rate] and says "Oh, My God, the people are shrinking." And an abundance mindset looks at it and says "Oh, my God, the people are growing." … This is a little bit of our mantra at our foundation – like, funding innovations. It's a profoundly optimistic place to be, empowering people to create new ideas, to create things that work for them and their peers; to just find new ways to play with this incredible tradition and wisdom is really optimistic and abundant – abundant sort of universe to live in."
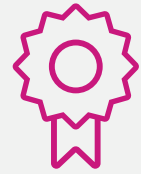
An expectation may be that an outcome of the program is that participants are able to show how they are elevating the work of others in their community toward shared goals.

Generate New Norms

There are several aspects of how we collectively define leaders and leadership that can influence the norms within our larger communities and society and influence how we frame "prestige". Leaders themselves, along with funders, operators, thought-leaders, program designers, and others can all influence the shape of those norms by expanding the stories we tell. Two important stories of leader journeys seem particularly relevant here: 1) what constitutes a key leadership experience and, 2) how we explicitly value interdependence over independence. We can influence these norms through the stories we tell and value.

For example, we craft our individual stories of our collective identities by making sense of our past experiences and how they got us to our present point. A leader may be a newly appointed recipient of a prestigious fellowship that bestows a title and admits them to a network but, as our data showed across the board, they make sense of this new identity through the lens of their earlier leadership experiences. Many of our study participants were able to identify ways that their leadership role at a summer camp when they were a teenager, or an early role in their synagogue, actually launched their understanding of themselves as a leader, and their ability to claim that identity. Connecting the dots back to these early experiences, ones that were powerful and yet not connected to the present prestigious opportunity, expands our ideas of where leadership can develop and be fostered within our own settings (see *Lessons of Experience report* for deeper exploration of youth experiences and their connection to future leadership).

We can also reframe the purpose of the program through the story that gets told about what makes it prestigious in a way that emphasizes interdependence as an ultimate goal. Cohort-based programs present an opportunity to change mental models around the false dichotomy between collaboration and competition and the negative connotations around self-promotion. If building your own skills and opportunities is reframed as making the community program stronger, it changes the narrative around self-promotion and networking. If sharing the skills gained or leveraging those skills to elevate others outside of the program is framed as further bolstering the impact of the program, it connotes a shift from individual to communal value. Within the field of higher education, research has shown that narrative framing influences how norms are conveyed, and these norms become powerful motivators for individual performance. For example, first-generation college-students, who are more likely to come from an interdependent cultural context, achieve better performance outcomes when the interdependent aspects of the university ("we're part of a community") are emphasized over the individualistic aspects ("everyone is paving their own path").[22]

"Many of the funders are working together and looking at field-level issues and yes, still funding programs and starting programs, but also really looking at what we are learning, how do we connect these dots, how do we fund in coalition, how do we support the field [and move the field] to create things that wouldn't happen without us brining organizations or even working beyond organizations together around a challenge or a bigger issue. … And I also think we're going to continue to see like, you know, a desire to really see the ROI and metrics around your giving and the struggle to kind of figure out what that looks like. And you know, a lot of these studies just for the sake of studies that are not really what I think help us see what's happening."

A key opportunity in network-focused cohort-based leadership development programs, then, is tapping into existing leader identity while at the same time enabling participants to create a new collective identity as "network leader" and to influence the narrative that gets told about the function of the program and what success will look like for the entire community. As discussed throughout this guide, network leadership requires different work,[23] different manifestations of leadership (less hierarchical or directive, more adaptive or collaborative), and different skills than what our hierarchical systems typically reward, which may require some revisioning of one's leader identity. **Programs that provide the space to allow participants to reflect on their choices and experiences, understand their definitions of leadership and how that is inextricably linked to their identity as leaders, and envision the ways their identities as leaders must grow to work in new ways toward bigger challenges are key to redefining prestige in service of the larger network.**