

A BOLDER FORM OF LEADERSHIP



BOLD, adj: “Of persons: Stout-hearted, courageous, daring, fearless; the opposite of ‘timid’ or ‘fearful’. Often, with admiration emphasized.”

- Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com)

Written by

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Executive Summary

The ongoing immigration debate, the continuing protests against police brutality and racial profiling, and the growing gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots” point to the urgent need to confront our country’s social, economic, and racial divides. How do we equip community leaders to address these divisions and power imbalances that disparately impact marginalized communities in America? One potent avenue for change is to train community leaders in the skills needed to navigate and influence complex, deeply rooted power structures and institutions. Effective leadership development programs demonstrate what is possible when nonprofit executives gain the transformative tools they need to tip the balance in favor of greater equity in low-income communities. This article looks at how one leader of color helped to bring about meaningful changes in a low-income, urban community assisted by LeaderSpring, a leadership development program based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Jennifer Lyle leads Building Blocks for Kids, based in Richmond, California. She previously had worked in leadership positions at other organizations, but was not certain she had the skills needed to succeed in her new executive role. By tracing Jennifer’s journey toward developing the leadership qualities she needed, we provide an analysis of LeaderSpring’s program methodology and impact. Readers will learn how intentionally designed supports prepare leaders like Jennifer to advance their causes and apply their increased confidence to alter social, economic, and racial disparities in the communities they serve. This article highlights how leadership is strengthened by applying an explicit equity lens into program curricula and integrating an analysis of power, privilege, and identity. In short, it shows how building leadership skills can contribute to a more just world by addressing structural barriers to equity.

A Bolder Form of Leadership



“It was a time when funders and residents were starting to look at things differently. Old ways weren’t working, so it was a prime moment to push for something new...”

– Jennifer Lyle

Jennifer Lyle runs Building Blocks for Kids (BBK),¹ an organization dedicated to improving children’s education and health in Richmond, California, located 12 miles northeast of San Francisco. Hired as the new executive leader in May 2010, Jennifer was excited to collaborate with BBK’s expanding base of partners—including nonprofits, public agencies, policymakers, and neighborhood residents—to bring about long-term community change.

Although Jennifer had held leadership positions at other organizations, she was uncertain whether her expertise in advocacy, research, and evaluation were the right fit for her new role. Additionally,

LeaderSpring’s mission is to foster a powerful, equity-driven social sector by strengthening leaders and organizations; developing communities of leaders; and transforming the systems in which they work.

resistance to some of the changes she initiated at BBK left her questioning her leadership. “I wasn’t sure if I had the wrong set of keys, or just didn’t know how to use them.” For these reasons, a year into her tenure at BBK, she applied to LeaderSpring’s² two-year, on-the-job Fellowship, designed to strengthen and develop community-based, grassroots leaders and organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. Jennifer credits the LeaderSpring Fellowship with her increased confidence to carry out her new role, equipping her with essential skills she needed to enhance BBK’s organizational effectiveness and connecting her with an invaluable peer

support network. Jennifer’s Fellowship deepened her analysis of how power, privilege, and identity play out at the community level, and altered her perceptions of herself as leader.

Jennifer has learned to maneuver through difficult power dynamics in Richmond. She has transformed BBK into an effective and powerful organization by activating and aligning her board of directors, building solid relationships with funders, and strengthening partnerships with government, community organizations, and, most important, community residents to improve the quality of life for Richmond’s children and families.

Richmond and Building Blocks for Kids



Richmond is a culturally vibrant city, with just over 100,000 residents from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. It is located in a place of great beauty, sitting on the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay, with 32 miles of waterfront. More than 100 acres of marshlands were recently restored, complete with new pedestrian and bike trails for residents to enjoy.

World War II once defined Richmond's waterfront. When the Kaiser shipyards sprang up to build warships, tens of thousands of new residents, both Black and White, migrated from the economically depressed South and Southwest. These shipyards closed at the end of the war. Though the economy never fully recovered, many displaced workers and their families stayed, adopting Richmond as their new home. The city has continued to diversify racially, with 83% of Richmond's residents identifying as people of color.³

Over the last decade, Richmond has emerged as a center for progressive politics. In 2006, Richmond became one of the largest U.S. cities to elect a Green Party mayor.⁴ The many ambitious initiatives underway reflect the community's commitment to a clean, healthy environment, safe and effective educational experiences, and just and affordable housing opportunities. At the same time, Richmond faces enormous challenges: high unemployment, prevalent crime, disinvested neighborhoods, underperforming schools, and industrial pollution from the petroleum refineries that surround the city.

In 2010, Jennifer stepped into the leadership of what was then a relatively new initiative. The mission of the BBK Collaborative is to impact education and family health and wellness through community engagement and advocacy. BBK is a place-based initiative, focused on Richmond's Iron Triangle, a neighborhood of just one square mile but populated by nearly 13,000 residents who face even greater inequities than the rest of Richmond. According to Jennifer, "BBK was created to bring a new approach that would show how, through collective action, both residents and organizations could be even more powerful." By helping "manage the turf," BBK supports multiple organizations to work collaboratively *with* instead of *against* one another to revitalize the community.

Jennifer soon found that those who sought to address Richmond's seemingly intractable issues needed to contend with deep-seated, historical dynamics, including: a small but powerful cadre of long-standing nonprofit leaders who held great sway over community funding and decision-making; a widespread resistance to holding service providers accountable for how they distributed resources received on behalf of the community; and a general disregard for authentically engaging neighborhood

residents in determining how to address the challenges facing their communities. As Jennifer discovered, pushing for change in the face of such terrain requires the keen ability to navigate these political and cultural dynamics, and a tremendous amount of self-confidence and resilience to weather the inherent challenges.

Naming the Issues

Stepping into her executive role, Jennifer observed that many of those who held power in Richmond were perpetuating some of the very problems they had assumed the responsibility to help resolve. An African American woman with a master's degree and Ph.D. in Social Work and Sociology, as well as many years of work experience, Jennifer quickly identified the inequitable power dynamics. Too often she witnessed nonprofit, public agency, and political leaders disregarding the views, wishes, and requests of community residents; she heard victim blaming, as well as denial about the impact of racial oppression. Jennifer shares, "Many decisions were being made on behalf of people who lived in the community. Much of the work being done was grounded in the perspective that people are broken and need to be fixed, rather than that the systems are broken."

Jennifer discovered that many of those in power held different perspectives from her own about how to effectively engage Richmond residents in the development of their city. "There weren't many leaders questioning why things were still the same. If people were doing things right, why hadn't anything changed? It's not that money and resources haven't come here." Jennifer found, "Many leaders had come to accept historical ways of doing things, regardless of whether or not they were effective. For some, work had become about sustaining their organizations and their jobs, rather than about trying to achieve community change. They had lost sight of why they were working here."

Jennifer's experience in LeaderSpring's Fellowship program helped her refine this theoretical analysis and visceral recognition of the problem, and put it to good use to address these obstacles head on.

Leadership Development in Context

Most nonprofit leaders working for equity find it challenging to master the many skills needed to succeed in their positions, let alone to effectively tackle complex power dynamics. The myriad problems facing today's nonprofit executives are well documented. The job itself is unwieldy, spanning everything from program development, fund development, human resources, budgeting, and daily management to long-term visioning and strategizing. The complex racial, economic, and political context surrounding nonprofit organizations creates even more barriers to positive community change.

LeaderSpring is committed to diversity. The majority of LeaderSpring's graduates are people of color (61%) and women (70%) who work in fields as diverse as education, health, childcare, job creation, economic justice, and advocacy. This intentional cross-issue dynamic encourages leaders to learn from and network with leaders outside of their familiar constellation of partners and competitors.

If the social sector is to truly address community needs, strengthening the capacity of nonprofit leaders like Jennifer is critical. The nonprofit sector is growing rapidly. The number of nonprofit organizations increased by 22% between 2001 and 2011, by which point 1.58 million nonprofits were registered with the Internal Revenue Service.⁵ At the present rate of growth, 80,000 new nonprofit leaders will be needed by 2016.⁶ At the same time, there is a dearth of ethnic diversity in the ranks of nonprofit leaders; only 18% of executive directors nationally are people of color.⁷ But it is not simply a matter of moving people of color up through a leadership pipeline.⁸ Once in the job, leaders of color face specific barriers to success, including lack of access to social capital and resources, as well as a bias against funding the types of small and grassroots organizations these leaders often run.⁹

These challenges are compounded by the fact that leaders in the social sector typically have limited access to the supports they need to strengthen their effectiveness.¹⁰ According to a study by the Foundation Center, business spends \$120 per employee per year on leadership development, while the social sector spends only \$29.¹¹

Jennifer's story reveals how grounding leadership development in a framework that acknowledges and analyzes structural inequities is essential for the success of diverse leaders and, ultimately, for the health of the communities they serve.

My Crew of 13



Breaking the sense of isolation that surrounds executive directors at the grassroots level is the first benefit many LeaderSpring Fellows experience. When she began her LeaderSpring Fellowship, Jennifer reports, “There were some crazy things going on at BBK. The first day of my Fellowship I realized, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m not the only one experiencing these kinds of things.’”

The isolation that Jennifer and others experience is personally challenging and can limit their



capacity as leaders. In the article *A New Leadership Mindset for Scaling Social Change*, leadership is defined as relationships “that are fluid, dynamic, non-directive, and unilateral.”¹² Traditional “heroic models” of leadership, in which a lone individual exerts influence over others to take action, fall short. For Jennifer, to

recognize that she shared her experience with other nonprofit executives was an important step in her leadership journey.

LeaderSpring intentionally builds community in spaces that are often experienced as competitive ones for executive directors, particularly given that each Fellowship class comprises executive directors from the same geographic region. At each month’s day-long Leader Circle, Fellows begin with a check-in,

LeaderSpring recognizes executive directors of nonprofit organizations as lynchpins of community change. Each year, following a competitive selection process, LeaderSpring awards Fellowships to 15 executive directors and invites them to join a cohort of peers from San Francisco or the East Bay.

a structured opportunity for each participant to speak about what is happening in her or his life, personally and professionally.¹³ Over the course of two years of this practice, Fellows strengthen their ability to reflect, authentically share with others, and listen actively without interruption or interpretation.

Jennifer says that her participation in Leader Circles was one of the first times she had experienced this kind of supportive space. Over time, she began to hear her own story reflected in the stories of others.

Leaders are also invited to bring real-time problems to the group for peer problem-solving. Often, the problem shared is one in which the dynamics of power, privilege, and identity are at play. Jennifer reflects, “As I heard and watched others make changes in their organizations, I began to believe that I, too, could go back and make the changes I needed to make.”

Jennifer’s bond with the other Fellows became so strong that she began visualizing “My Crew of 13”—the other Fellows in her LeaderSpring class—standing with her. As she faced her organization’s challenges, she would remind herself of the support she received from her peers at LeaderSpring: “They’re pulling for me. I’m not by myself trying to make this work. I have allies. There are other people who believe there are changes that need to be made.” Creating the space for this kind of peer-to-peer support is essential for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion,¹⁴ and can play a critical role in buoying

leaders' convictions about their own equity beliefs when their professional environment triggers self-doubt.

You Get What You Accept

Another step toward developing leadership is making meaning of one's history and experiences with power. Jennifer vividly remembers an interaction she had with LeaderSpring's Director of Programs, Dr. Renato Almanzor, at one of the early monthly Leader Circles. After the session, she approached him to talk about the difficult people she was dealing with in Richmond and the power dynamics she faced. Mainly, she admits, she wanted validation of how "messed up" the situation really was. To her surprise, after she finished sharing, Renato responded with just one sentence: "You know," he said, "you get what you accept."

At first she was angry at his response and felt misunderstood. Then, little by little, she began to think about his comments as she found herself in various work situations. For example, she asked herself why she accepted a norm of sitting in long, disorganized meetings, dominated by powerful organizational leaders. She wondered why she accepted the fact that her office was run-down, had hardly any furniture (one of her staff members was using an upside-down plastic bucket as a chair), and was infested with fleas. She wondered why she believed that there was nothing she could do to change the circumstances in which she worked. "I believed that I had no power. Renato's comment reminded me that I had everything I needed."

Slowly but surely, Jennifer gained a deeper sense of her own personal agency and started to reframe her expectations. She says, "I realized that making change would be difficult. If it were easy, it would have been done already." She began attending only those community meetings that closely aligned with and showed promise to further BBK's goals—whether they were sponsored by Richmond's established power brokers or not. This felt like a risky move, particularly because some of these power brokers controlled the purse strings of her collaborative. However, she found that her actions focused her and BBK staff's attention on their priorities, saved a great deal of time and energy, and sent a clear message that BBK was setting its own agenda. Jennifer notes that this move also sparked a shift within BBK "toward challenging the necessity of long-standing programs, projects, and other efforts that did not provide evidence of effectiveness."

The management and leadership trainings that Jennifer participated in through LeaderSpring provided her with the information, skills, and tools she needed to boldly take on other challenging issues as well. For example, at LeaderSpring, Jennifer took part in advanced training on nonprofit financial management. What she learned raised red flags about how funding was being allocated in the Iron Triangle. As Jennifer reports, "Having the tools and resources made me more confident and able to stand

up. Lots of people were wondering, but no one was asking. I started asking.” Jennifer’s questions led her to gain control over her collaborative’s budget and to ensure that funding was directed in alignment with funders’ intentions and community residents’ interests.

Critically important to Jennifer, her experience with LeaderSpring affirmed her strong belief in the right of community residents to have their “voices in the planning, development, and implementation of programs meant to serve them and their children.” Jennifer reports, “We follow the lead of community residents in determining our focus, which has contributed significantly to the development of higher standards for considering, implementing, and funding community engagement strategies.”

Jennifer’s experience of using an explicit equity lens during her Fellowship is now integrated into her collaborative practice in the Iron Triangle. BBK’s board and collaborative partners now routinely incorporate “the implications of historical racial and social inequities on seemingly intractable, current issues” into their stakeholder planning. Jennifer believes that her work cannot be successful without addressing questions of power, privilege, and identity. The resounding equity theme that was woven into her leadership development experience at LeaderSpring continues to empower Jennifer and her partners to work on structural and systemic barriers to justice and equity, be they racial, economic, or social.

What Leadership Can Look Like

Jennifer’s multi-day study trip, a key element of LeaderSpring’s program, was another pivotal turning point in her leadership. She traveled to Neighborhood Centers Inc. in Texas, a large and

Study trips to “mentor” agencies across the country are one of the key elements integrated into LeaderSpring’s two-year, on-the-job Fellowship. Fellows also participate in extensive leadership and management trainings, gain and offer peer support, and work one-on-one with executive coaches to set and achieve individual and organizational goals.

respected organization she selected to learn new strategies for community change. Jennifer shared that she developed an “organizational crush” on Neighborhood Centers Inc. while learning about its success at engaging community members in advancing the rights and power of the community. President and CEO Angela Blanchard challenged Jennifer to expand her mental picture of what a leader could look and act like. Angela asked Jennifer to think about the implications of being an African American woman not willing to see herself as a leader. What would that mean for the community in Richmond?

The inability to see oneself as a leader is not held by Jennifer alone. As Deborah Meehan and Natalia Castaneda of Leadership Learning Community describe: “the prevalence of a ‘dominant culture’ model of leadership, or set of characteristics defined as leader-like that is culturally biased and can limit the recognition, support, and acceptance of people of color as leaders.”¹⁵ It is a common experience

for people of color and other underserved groups to feel that they do not fit into the dominant cultural

model of leadership. Until there are more culturally inclusive leadership models and programs that encourage their leadership, people of color will continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions and their potential will remain unrealized.¹⁶

LeaderSpring, in dialogue with its Fellows, examines the ways in which structural barriers to

As part of the Fellowship, executive directors invite their board chairs to join them in a day-long Board Summit that is designed to strengthen the most important professional relationship in a nonprofit organization: the relationship between the executive director and the board chair.

leadership take hold. Confidence-building requires a critical analysis of how race, class, and gender play into perspectives on who is a leader and who is not. When Jennifer walked into a room, she carried with her the perception that people would see her as “an angry Black woman.” Because of the structural racism she had experienced, it was hard for her to decipher if her perception was in fact correct or a remnant of her past experience. She had grown to accept this view so deeply that she had stopped challenging it.

Through a strong and diverse community of peers in the Fellowship, as well as the challenge posed by her study trip host, Jennifer engaged in critical self-reflection and reexamined her own self-concept. Jennifer credits her LeaderSpring Fellowship with showing her that it was important to recognize her disappointment with the challenges of racism

and sexism that she faced on a regular basis, and still be able to advance her work and her own leadership development.

Jennifer has broken free of some of these constraints, including the “heroic” notion of leadership, and says, “Thanks to my Fellowship, I now understand my value as a leader. Rather than imagining a leader as someone who comes into these situations perfectly, I see myself as someone who will navigate challenges and forge a path with others.”

“I’ve Got Your Back”

Jennifer attributes the partnership she formed with her board chair during the LeaderSpring Board Summit as being the ultimate game changer for her. “The Board Summit completely changed how things were going to happen at BBK,” reflects Jennifer. Inviting her board chair, Don Lau, to spend a day with her and other executive directors and board chairs clarified his understanding of his role. During a “fishbowl” exercise in which all board chairs were invited to sit together in the center of the room and reflect on their roles and responsibilities, Don heard the board chair from Beyond Emancipation, a highly successful and respected Bay Area organization, say, “Our job is to support the executive and to help him to succeed.” This experience changed Don and Jennifer’s relationship.

Don left the meeting saying, “We have to go back and change things.” This was a risk for him as a long-time leader of another Richmond nonprofit organization. It meant that he had to put a stake in the ground to support Jennifer and BBK in a new way. Though it was not easy, Don and Jennifer took this shared leadership commitment back to their organization. “It was one of the most significant power changes for me as an organizational leader,” Jennifer says. “My board chair committed to have my back.”

Over the course of the next year, there was a significant positive transition on BBK’s board. The defining shift, according to Jennifer, was that Don communicated to other members of the BBK Collaborative that they have a responsibility to the organization, rather than the other way around. “Now, the board expects me to lead powerfully. Board members now ask, ‘What do you need to do your work?’ They are proud, too, of their participation in the BBK board and see the difference they are making.” Now with an aligned, committed board, Jennifer says, BBK is a more effective organization.

A Community Realizing Its Promise and Potential

Jennifer is finishing her fifth year of leading BBK. Under her leadership, BBK has more than doubled its budget and the staff has grown from one to fifteen. The organization has moved from a run-down building to a beautiful new location, fully furnished and with sufficient space to host community meetings. This new venue is particularly important because it reflects to residents the possibilities for change. Each year, BBK engages almost 3,000 residents (a nearly tenfold increase from five years before) in making community changes. By engaging, training, and hiring local residents to take on leadership in BBK’s daily work and in larger policy conversations in Richmond, BBK has begun to shift the community’s power dynamics. As a result of this change, Jennifer reports that the work is “better informed by the community’s wishes and intentions.”

Jennifer is also more effective at navigating bureaucratic red tape and complicated relationships with long-standing institutions to improve the education and health of Richmond’s children. This includes the school district, which many in the community believed to be impenetrable. BBK lobbied the school district to reconsider TB testing and fingerprinting requirements, long-standing procedures that created barriers to greater community participation. As a result, schools serving the Iron Triangle are now more accessible to service providers and parents. These schools also have opened their doors so that providers may offer a wide array of community programs that complement academic learning, including family activities, health and wellness programs, and mental health services.

Making these changes was not easy. To help push things forward, Jennifer relied on both a growing network of allies and a strong relationship she built with a particular funder. She asked her program officer at The California Endowment to help facilitate a meeting with the West Contra Costa County Unified School District’s Assistant Superintendent. As a result of this conversation, the Assistant

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Superintendent set up meetings for Jennifer with school principals, which in turn produced benefits for residents and the schools as well. For example, to amplify student learning, BBK worked with the schools to distribute more than 1,000 free computers to Richmond families. Through a partnership with California Emerging Technology Fund, BBK will soon offer low-cost broadband services to more than 800 families.

Through deepened collaboration, the Iron Triangle community has realized a big win in improving the health and well-being of local children. When the city built new bike and pedestrian walkways along Richmond's waterfront, Iron Triangle residents felt excluded from the process. Not surprisingly, BBK found that the trails were not being "embraced by residents of the Iron Triangle the community," says Jennifer, "though that is changing." Although sharing information about this local resource for exercise and recreation helped, BBK saw that more creative action was needed. Few Iron Triangle residents had functioning bikes, and parents feared for their children's safety on unfamiliar trails.

Jennifer and the BBK team reframed the question of how to improve the health and well-being of



Richmond families by asking her colleagues at the county and city level to answer the question: "How can we help people think of biking as fun?" Under the leadership of BBK, these agencies helped launch a new effort that would overcome barriers specific to the Iron Triangle and other low-income communities. First, in promoting the trails they featured a role model that the community could relate to: the famous African American cyclist Marshall "Major" Taylor, who, in the early 1900s, overcame personal challenges to become one of the fastest cyclists in the world. Second, BBK partnered with county agencies to give away free bikes and helmets to youth and adults throughout the community, and ensured that anyone with a bike that needed fixing could get it repaired. Jennifer recalls, "If someone came to us carrying just the handlebars, they left with a complete bike."

BBK is now in its fifth year of organizing the "Major Taylor Bike Fiesta — Fix the Cycle" event, which in May 2014 drew 600 participants and over 100 resident volunteers. Thanks to Jennifer, BBK, and community partners, biking is now an attractive and viable option for hundreds of Iron Triangle families.

Bolder Leadership for Community Transformation

The ability of change agents like Jennifer to work with others to shift the landscape of their

Since 1997, LeaderSpring's Fellowship has benefitted more than 200 people. For every leader strengthened, on average, 4,220 clients are served.

communities is the result of a deeply personal process of transformation. LeaderSpring supports each leader's unique journey, while simultaneously providing structured opportunities for participants to *think and work* together toward eliminating systemic economic, social, and racial disparities. Why? So that leaders can more confidently and effectively take risks that lead to important community victories as well as deep systemic changes.

Leadership journeys like Jennifer's help us see ways to break through the internal and structural barriers that keep leaders from realizing their promise and potential. Investing in leaders like Jennifer is essential to creating equity and opportunity for low-income communities.

Questions for Reflection

1. When have you been courageous, risk-taking, and provocative toward meaningful change?
2. What are you currently accepting that might be inhibiting your leadership?
3. What on-going supports could you put in place to increase your confidence and effectiveness to alter social, economic, and racial disparities?

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Endnotes

¹ www.bbk-richmond.org

² www.leaderspring.org

³ According to the U.S. Census, Richmond's population in 2010 was 40% Latino, 26% African American, 17% White, 13% Asian; the remainder identified as other or more than one race. Source: www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Richmond.htm.

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