

RESOURCING NETWORKS FOR EQUITABLE SYSTEMS CHANGE

Perspectives from Funders,
Intermediaries, Individuals, and
Organizations





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Cover Image by Brian Stout

Table of Contents

Setting the Stage for this Work	4
Hosting the Networks for Equitable Systems Transformation (NEST) Convening	6
Learning by Doing and Being	7
Deep Equity	8
Valuing Multiple Ways of Knowing, Learning, and Communicating	9
Inner Work	13
Shared Leadership	14
Complex Systems Change	15
A Summary of Our Learnings	16
Learnings: Questions that Emerged	16
Learnings: Key Themes and Lessons Shared by Participants	17
How Funders Operate in Networks	17
Network Assumptions and Shapes	18
Networks' Capacity, Impact, and Infrastructure Needs	19
Ways of Being Needed to Build, Resource, and Support Networks	21
Opportunities for the Field	22
Appendix	23
Feasibility Study from the Network Weaver Learning Lab	23
Principles for Networked Leadership	23
Principles to Guide Us	24
Learning Questions from the Field	25
Participant List	28

Setting the Stage for this Work

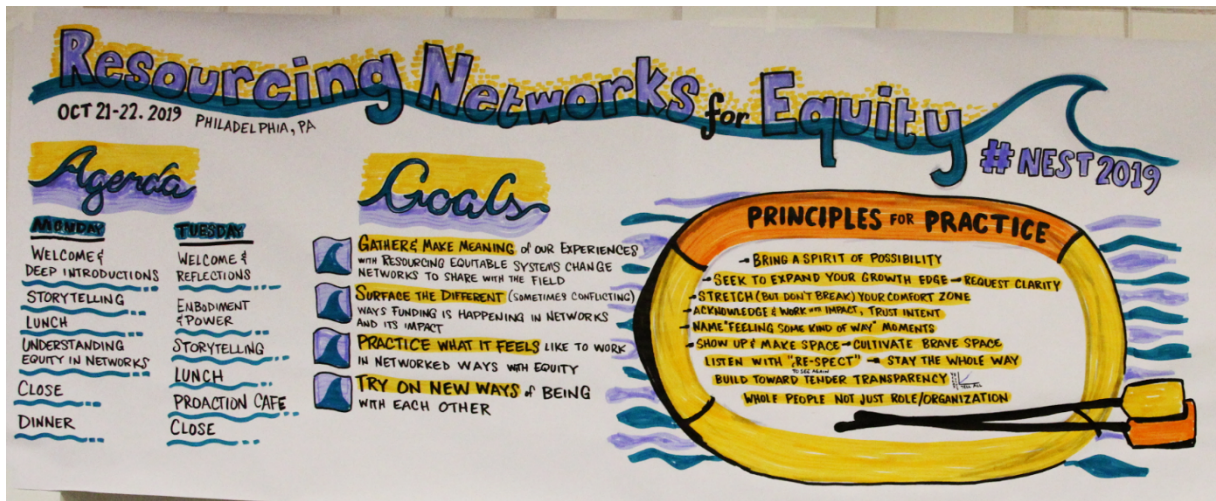


Photo by Breathe Media. Graphic Recording by Brandon Black.

The events of the past year have made clear what many in and outside of philanthropy already knew: that equality in resource distribution is not equity; that much of what was thought impossible to change - telework policies, reporting requirements, fiduciary responsibilities - has suddenly become possible; that what we need to shift big systems is interdependence (not codependence); and that at the core of what is needed for this to happen begins with our relationship to one another - as individuals, organizations, and communities.

Last year, in partnership with Uma Viswanathan and Matt Pierce at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a design team of network practitioners including Allen Kwabena Frimpong, Aisha Shillingford, Marissa Tirona, Robin Katcher, and Deborah Meehan, gathered with 70 other network funders, practitioners, and participants to explore the following questions:

- How have funders and other organizations worked together in networks that promote equity and systems change?
- What are the barriers to resourcing networks for equitable systems change, and what would it take to shift those barriers?
- What is the personal work and way of being needed to fully engage in networks, equity and systems change?

Why equity, networks, and systems change?

A core assumption of this work is that systems change and working in network with others are necessary pathways to achieving equity and equitable outcomes.

Increasingly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is engaging networks – groups of affiliated individuals, organizations and communities working together united by a shared vision¹ – as an

¹ See Robin Katcher's *Unstill Waters: The Fluid Role of Networks in Social Movements* published in the Nonprofit Quarterly for more about how networks differ from social movements. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/unstill-waters-the-fluid-role-of-networks-in-social-movements-2/>

important structure in building towards health equity. To reach this goal, it is not only important that groups work in networked ways, but also that they are engaging in complex systems change.

Too often, we focus on the interpersonal dynamics of inequity (e.g., implicit bias, unconscious microaggressions towards others, overt racism, etc.). Inequity, however, exists at multiple levels – individual, interpersonal, institutional, structural and systemic. If we do not identify and repair the broken systems that perpetuate inequity and focus only on interpersonal dynamics, we will always fall short of our goal.² The inverse is also true: if we focus only on systems and structures and ignore people and their relationships with each other, we will not be able to work together to create the long-term change we seek. And in both cases, when focusing on one piece over the other - systems versus people - we may end up causing more harm.

Our North Star Question

With these core assumptions in mind, as a cross-organizational team of RWJF and Change Elemental staff, we focused the work on networks advancing equity through systems change and asked the question: *How might philanthropy resource and support networks to shift systems and build towards greater equity?*

Working in close partnership with Program Officers, Uma Viswanathan and Matthew Pierce, and drawing upon the wisdom of a small Advisory Group³ of funders and other network practitioners and participants, we developed a set of working agreements,⁴ identified related inquiry questions in the field about resourcing networks for equitable systems change,⁵ and began mapping a pathway to answering them.

² See *Systems Change with an Equity Lens: Community Interventions that Shift Power and Center Race* for a framework developed by Building Movement Project and Change Elemental on the relationship between these two elements. In addition, Change Elemental is developing a forthcoming piece that delves deeper into the discipline of systems change and what is lost when equity is not at the core.

<https://changeelemental.org/resources/systems-change-with-an-equity-lens-community-interventions-that-shift-power-and-center-race/>

³ The advisory group included: Natalie Bamdad, Allen Kwabena Frimpong, Robin Katcher, Alison Lin, Deborah Meehan, Matthew Pierce, Elissa Sloan Perry, Aisha Shillingford, and Uma Viswanathan.

⁴ Our agreements as an Advisory Group: Transparency; Be Real About Power; Not just tactically learning things (or focusing on tactics) but working on growing our own mindsets and paying attention to what's shifting inside of us; Name feeling some kind of way moments – “I’m feeling something that needs to be named so that I can be present.”

⁵ We use this phrase as shorthand to mean working in relationship and with shared vision to shift systems of oppression and move us all towards greater equity. These concepts aren’t new, and others likely have different language to refer to these same concepts.

Hosting the Networks for Equitable Systems Transformation (NEST) Convening



Photo by Brian Stout.

In partnership with the Advisory Group, we hosted a 2-day convening bringing together nearly 60 funders and on-the-ground leaders who are experimenting with, building, bridging, and leveraging networks for equity through systems change.⁶

Our intention was to learn together and shift how resources flow into networks working towards equity, so that funders might strengthen their practices in networks (including funding and capacity building) to better align with the specific needs of networks and how to best support them.

Over two days we engaged our bodies, hearts and minds, and worked at multiple levels (from individual to systemic) to:

- Gather and make meaning of our experiences working towards equity in networks to share with the field, including sharing lessons from funders and their grantees, and people building and leading networks about how they support equity and systems change **(systems-level)**
- Surface the different ways funding is distributed within and across networks and its impacts, both good and bad **(systems-level)**
- Practice working (and being) together in networked ways with equity at the center - particularly in relation to power dynamics within networks, specifically in relation to funders and other network participants **(group-level)**
- Share and discuss practices and ways of being needed to do this work well **(interpersonal and individual level)**

⁶ Please see the Appendix for the NEST gathering participant list.

Learning by Doing and Being: Why (and How) We Built a Networked Gathering to Learn about Networks



Silly and smiling group photos from the first day of our gathering in Philadelphia. Photos by Breathe Media.

We sought to build an environment that was less extractive of participants' knowledge, and where those with different levels of experience and understanding were able to learn from each other and bring their varied expertise forward.

We knew that in order to start collectively answering our questions about networks, we would need to align participants at the convening around what we all mean by “networks,” “equity,” and “systems change.” Over 40 years of experience working in and with networks has taught us that building shared understanding across this diverse group of people would need to go beyond shared language and definitions. Instead of trying to achieve the difficult task of shared understanding through language in a short time, we built alignment through shared experience. We designed a convening that modeled what it's like to be in a network for equitable systems change, including practicing networked ways of

working, leading with an intersectional racial equity lens,⁷ and changing systems in a process that embedded these elements within the design. Through their attendance at the gathering, participants were invited to live into a network for equity and systems change.

To achieve this goal, we rooted our process in five key elements that we believe are essential to transformative change in complex systems. We describe our approach to each below.

Deep Equity



Groups of participants pose for photos during pro-action café topics, which touched on wholeness, Justice Funders' movement commons campaign,⁸ and philanthropy. Photos by Breathe Media.

Deep equity is a practice that we are continually striving for, not a destination. It includes honoring differences; recognizing the impact our identities and positions have on our individual and collective experiences; focusing on relationships and whole beings with multiple identities; addressing trauma and healing; eliminating systemic disparities; and transforming structures, systems, processes, and cultures.

How deep equity showed up in our process:

- **Creating an equity fund to support participation of individuals who would otherwise not be able to attend.** We initially set aside \$13,000 for this fund which could support anything including travel, hotel, childcare, or funding a participants' time (e.g., if they are paid hourly or needed to take a vacation day to attend). We adapted principles for creating an equity fund from Leadership Learning Community, and had participants name the amount they needed

⁷ *Leading with an Intersectional Racial Equity Lens, a Brief* by Maura Bairley, MA with the REIL Learning Team (2015 – 2016): Helen Kim, Karie Brown, Mari Ryono, Maria Ramos-Chertok, Michael Bell, Mike Allison and Susan Colson. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1512xFQYCaK6Gh8gLNrBcZS_mtw8MQZVg/view

⁸ "Movement Commons is a national campaign to re-imagine and practice transformative, regenerative, and collaborative approaches to building power and resourcing social justice movements." Read more from Justice Funders: <http://justicefunders.org/action/>

without limitation. We issued stipends (rather than reimbursements) in the amount requested to eliminate the administrative burden of gathering receipts. We offered a similar pool of funds as compensation to our Advisory Group for their time. An equity fund, which takes into account participant's individual and varied needs, is different from paying for all participants' travel and accommodation. This equity approach required more relationship building than an equality approach where funds are distributed equally. In order for the equity fund to serve its purpose, we needed to create a context where individuals were comfortable enough to ask for what they needed. Through this approach, we learned that money is not the only resource that supports equity. By creating the context for a successful equity fund, we also made space for other requests to emerge such as thought partnership, using the convening as a platform for testing and sharing new ideas, etc.

- **Playing the role of facilitator instead of expert.** When we shifted from the role of expert, we created space for participants to bring their varied wisdom and experiences to the forefront. Participants shared their own knowledge with the group through presentations and spark stories. This approach also created space for participants to connect with each other instead of through us.
- **Expanding the co-created participant list to reflect the way networks form and grow.** Members of the advisory group built an invite list and anticipated 30 attendees. As word spread, and through conversation with participants, the attendee list grew to 60. People responded enthusiastically to an invitation to learn together across boundaries. Rather than play the role of gatekeeper, we shifted our approach to accommodate new growth.
- **Naming power in the space.** We were explicit in our facilitation about the power differential between funders and other participants. We focused on relationship building to create a space where participants could also help in naming power or discomfort.
- **Practicing equity in our selection of vendors (and with more time and planning, we could have done this better).** We prioritized local, community-based, women-owned, and people of color-owned businesses when identifying a space for the convening, videographers, catering, etc.

Valuing Multiple Ways of Knowing, Learning, and Communicating

We live in a society that privileges specific ways of understanding the world around us and communicating – i.e., “ways of knowing.” We worship the written word, and we favor rational or logical knowing over our intuition, ancestral or bodily knowing. When specific forms of knowing are valued over others, we privilege the knowledge and experience of groups that communicate the way we do and we silence others. If we don’t make space for other ways of knowing and sharing, we miss important information about the world around us. Lifting up multiple ways of knowing is a way to intentionally interrupt normative systems that tell us who is smart, powerful and worth listening to; it is a way to shift systems towards deeper equity.



Participants practice feeling the difference when being pushed while they are ungrounded and when they are intentionally grounded in their bodies. Photo by Breathe Media.

PRINCIPLE

NETWORK COMPONENTS

Building and reinforcing social ties among the people creates trust among network participants, allowing them to collaborate and making it easier to overcome potential strategy disagreements. Creating open communication channels where network participants can have conversations with one another is important, and can be as simple as a WhatsApp group or an email list serv.

Developing a common language that reinforces the identity of the network and works to resolve any conflict is key. Working with network participants to define a clear vision will align people and help them understand the advantages of being a part of the network. Creating shared resources will allow people to pool their skills, talents, experiences, expertise, services and funding streams. This strengthens social ties and also saves individual members of the network time and money. Identifying actors who drive the activities of the network—including by monitoring resources, creating messaging, outlining participant responsibilities and receiving feedback—will enable the network to effectively move forward. Lastly, creating mechanisms to provide feedback on network activity helps leaders understand the trends, resources and needs of the entire network.

- Q. What components are covered?
- Q. What isn't being attended to?
- Q. What components could use some love and attention?

11

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A pipe cleaner sculpture and a card from the medicine deck focused on networks. Photo by Breathe Media.

Creating space for multiple ways of knowing can be as simple as designing a conversation where people who process internally or alone have time to write down their thoughts before sharing with the full group. It could also include drawing, singing, or feeling into our bodies to tap other arsenals of knowledge in our right brains. Increasingly, scientists are learning more about the many “brains” in our bodies, beyond just our thinking brain. For decades, multiple intelligences have been recognized especially in relation to processing information, generating ideas, and solving problems.^{9,10} This includes kinesthetic, spatial, and emotional intelligence; and linked to this is bodily awareness, known as somatic awareness and practices.¹¹ Often connected, we can draw on ancestral and cultural wisdom, intuitive knowing, and the insight of the arts with their ability to represent complexity, as well as what may be more familiar rationalist approaches rooted in theory, logic, and numeric analysis that are so often over-privileged in U.S. dominant culture.¹²

- **Learning through doing and being rather than reading or observing.** Our approach shifted to center learning as a relational and dynamic exchange versus a didactic presentation. We originally designed this project to be a scan of networks with a heavy research component on how networks are set up and resourced. Through further conversations with the Advisory Group and team, we explored the idea of a shared learning space where network experts could also be included in our learning. We engaged funders as “doers,” and people learning alongside and with network participants, and encouraged participants to bring their experiences of funding and being in networks to bear.
- **Using storytelling, drawing, and embodied practices to share learning and practice collective sensemaking.** A representative mix of funders,¹³ intermediaries and network leaders shared “spark stories” to answer prompts related to resourcing networks¹⁴ and spark conversation. Specific stories addressed how funders and other organizations are working together in networks, barriers to resourcing networks for equitable systems change, and the personal work and way of being needed to participate in networks.¹⁵ While we created time for each person to share their own spark story in small groups, we encouraged creative sharing. Participants told stories through metaphor and drawing.¹⁶ This practice is based on research that demonstrates that learning through multiple channels (e.g., storytelling, drawing, metaphor, etc.) provides

⁹ *The Neuroscience of Creativity* by Tara Swart explains how the brain’s ability to adapt can allow for better decision-making for social good (SSIR Review 2019).

https://ssir.org/books/excerpts/entry/the_neuroscience_of_creativity

¹⁰ *The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Davis, Katie & Christodoulou, Joanna & Seider, Scott & Gardner, Howard. (2011).

¹¹ Learn more about *Somatic Awareness and Somatic Practices as practiced by Generative Somatics and Strozzi Institute*. Watch this video: <https://strozziinstitute.com/about-2/>

¹² Read more about multiple ways of knowing in our NPQ article, *Multiple Ways of Knowing: Expanding How We Know*. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/multiple-ways-of-knowing-expanding-how-we-know/>

¹³ Including those from small and large institutions, and institutions at different points in their equity journeys.

¹⁴ These included: (1) How have funders and other organizations worked together in networks that promote equity and systems change? (2) What are the barriers to resourcing networks for equitable systems change? (3) What is the personal work and way of being needed to fully engage in networks, equity and systems change?

¹⁵ See report section, “Learnings: Key Themes and Lessons Shared by Participants.”

¹⁶ An example of one group’s visual storytelling from the convening.

pathways to new thinking and insights that would not be possible through simply thinking, reading, or listening alone.^{17, 18}

- **Supporting people to access information and knowledge by connecting with their emotions.** Rather than suppressing or compartmentalizing emotions, participants were supported in telling the story of their learning through art, song, and embodiment. We also shared a deck of cards created through a network experience to encourage creative reflection.¹⁹
- **Investing in graphic recording and video interviews to bring insights and highlights to life.** By incorporating real time visual representation of ideas, we helped people to coalesce learnings in the moment and reflect across the two days together. These images represent shared understanding and became touchpoints for group memory.²⁰ Recorded video interviews helped us capture not only people’s insights, but also their expression and tone – communicating deeper levels of meaning.

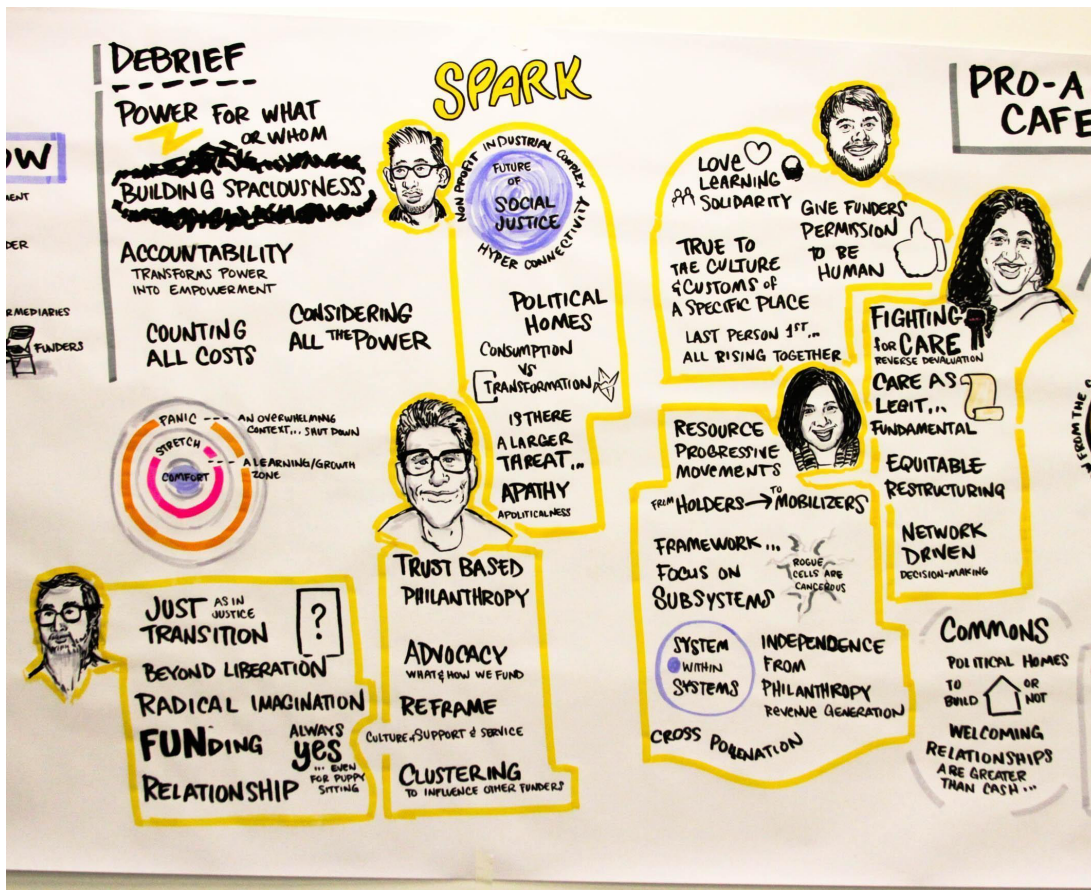


Image of spark stories from gathering. Graphic Recording by Brandon Black.

¹⁷ Fernandes, Myra A. et al. *The Surprisingly Powerful Influence of Drawing on Memory*, (2018).

¹⁸ Thibodeau, P. H., Boroditsky, L. *Metaphors we think with: The role of metaphor in reasoning*. PLoS ONE, 6(2), e16782. (2011).

¹⁹ Participants asked for copies of the Network Weaver Learning Lab deck available here:

<https://changeelemental.org/resources/weaving-together-a-world-without-violence-medicine-cards/>

²⁰ A graphic recording memory keeper is available for download here: www.changeelemental.org/resourcing-networks-for-equity-and-systems-change

Inner Work

The work of participating in networks for equitable systems change can be challenging. The arc of this work is long and we are never ever “finished.” This difficult work calls upon leaders to continue on indefinitely, and draw upon reserves of hope, wisdom and strength. Individual and collective practices of inner work serve to bolster leadership capacities and replenish our reserves.²¹

It is the practice of becoming whole people and becoming our better selves.²²

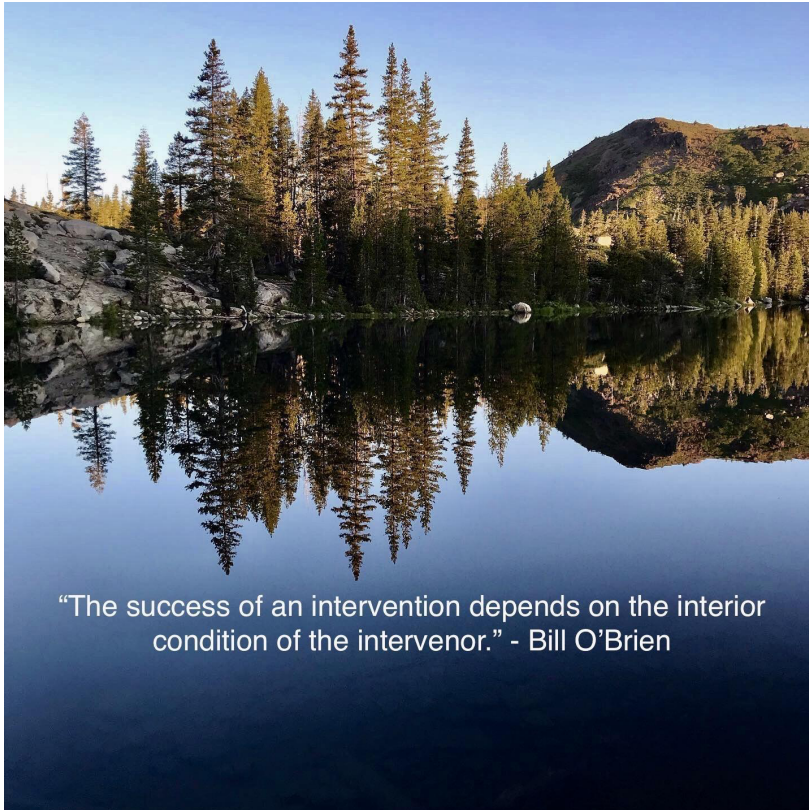


Photo by Alison Lin.

Inner work practices – including mindfulness, connecting to source, spirituality, etc. – is often the work that is overlooked and underfunded. These practices connect people to purpose and bolster skills like self-management and emotional intelligence that are too often overlooked. As one participant shared, “Had I known what this convening would be like, I never would have come...and I’m so glad I did.” We offered opportunities for inner work through:

²¹ Read more from Sheryl Petty about inner work intersections in *Waking Up To All of Ourselves: Inner Work, Social Justice, & Systems Change*. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/waking-up-to-all-of-ourselves-inner-work-social-justice-systems-change/>

²² For more about inner work, please refer to our article, *Toward Love, Healing, Resilience & Alignment: The Inner Work of Social Transformation & Justice*, in the Nonprofit Quarterly. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/toward-love-healing-resilience-alignment-the-inner-work-of-social-transformation-justice/>

- **Creating a community resource table to support participants.** We set up a community care table - with food, tinctures, tissues, herbs, reflection prompts, and other “medicines” to support well-being. We invited participants to take from and share gifts with others.
- **Making space to focus on our bodies.** We drew upon lineages of embodiment, presenting and more fully inhabiting our bodies to sharpen our attention. This included practicing forward stance – feeling into stability in our core to keep us grounded when we are literally pushed off balance.²³
- **Creating a set of community agreements for people to work with and towards.** They included agreements such as practicing tender transparency, which invites people to take larger risks in sharing, and also taking accountability to name what is confidential.
- **Inviting in people’s whole selves.** We did this through small group sharing and creation of individual poems about self, community, and purpose.

Shared Leadership²⁴

*Leadership is the capacity to create something of meaning, and align values and actions across groups of people or communities. It is about relationships among people and how they support, complement, and supplement each other and the broader ecosystem.*²⁵



Advisory group members pose together during their first time in person together. Photo by Breathe Media.

We tended to shared leadership by:

- **Inviting in leadership from the Advisory Group to co-design the convening, and other participants to hold pieces of facilitation and presentation as a way to honor and call upon the expertise in the room.** Members of the advisory group and attendees were given storytelling

²³ Read more about Forward Stance in this article by Movement Strategy Center.

<https://movementstrategy.org/forward-together-breaks-bold-vision/>

²⁴ See Appendix for a framework on networked leadership.

²⁵ For more on shared leadership, please see Change Elemental’s article, *Cultivating Leaderful Ecosystems*, in the Nonprofit Quarterly. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/cultivating-leaderful-ecosystems/>

and facilitation roles throughout the convening. Because participants, the core team, and Advisory Group aligned around a shared vision for the convening, the core team was able to loosen control over the agenda. This supported different participants in sharing their knowledge and other gifts: Allen and Rachel shared content about network structures; attendees prepared and delivered spark stories about their own experiences; Robin and Deborah helped gather and organize the questions that emerged over the two days; and Uma and Marissa shared vulnerably about their positionalities as funders of networks who are accountable to the communities they serve.²⁶

- **Flexing leadership across our core RWJF and Change Elemental Team meant that the work could move forward even when our team composition changed.** Over the course of the project, our team configurations shifted based on context and needs. When the scope of work became clearer, Matt brought in his colleague Uma to take lead on the project, and Matt played an important support role. This redundancy in leadership allowed for smooth continuation despite challenging circumstances when Matt became seriously ill and Uma played a greater role in holding RWJF’s perspective. On the Change Elemental side, Elissa Sloan Perry, co-director, brought in Natalie Bamdad and Alison Lin to support the project. This meant that while Elissa was out on a sabbatical, the project moved forward smoothly. When Elissa returned, she reentered as a thought partner in support of the project rather than project lead. We were explicit in how we shared and shifted leadership based on the needs of the project. As a result, leadership was more seamless, and our process enabled everyone to bring their full gifts to the work.

Complex Systems Change

Systems change is the process of shifting narratives, relationships, structures, and power in order to solve today’s most complex problems and foster equity.

By catalyzing new ways of thinking and being together, we help changemakers get to the heart of—and ultimately transform—the multifaceted and interdependent problems they want to solve while holding equity at the center.

- **We connected systems change to equity.** All social justice is systems change.^{27,28} Because inequity is rooted in systems of injustice that scale from the individual to the societal, we cannot achieve equity without a systems lens. The assumption, then, is that whenever we talk about equity we are also talking about shifting, repairing, and transforming broken systems.
- **We interrupted systems that dictate how we convene and gather people, and how we learn.** The practice of equity, inner work, multiple ways of knowing, and shared leadership in the convening design is a pathway to transforming systems and, for example, modeling a different way for how philanthropy and funders might learn, convene, and engage with organizations on the ground. As referenced earlier in this report, the Advisory Group helped fundamentally shift

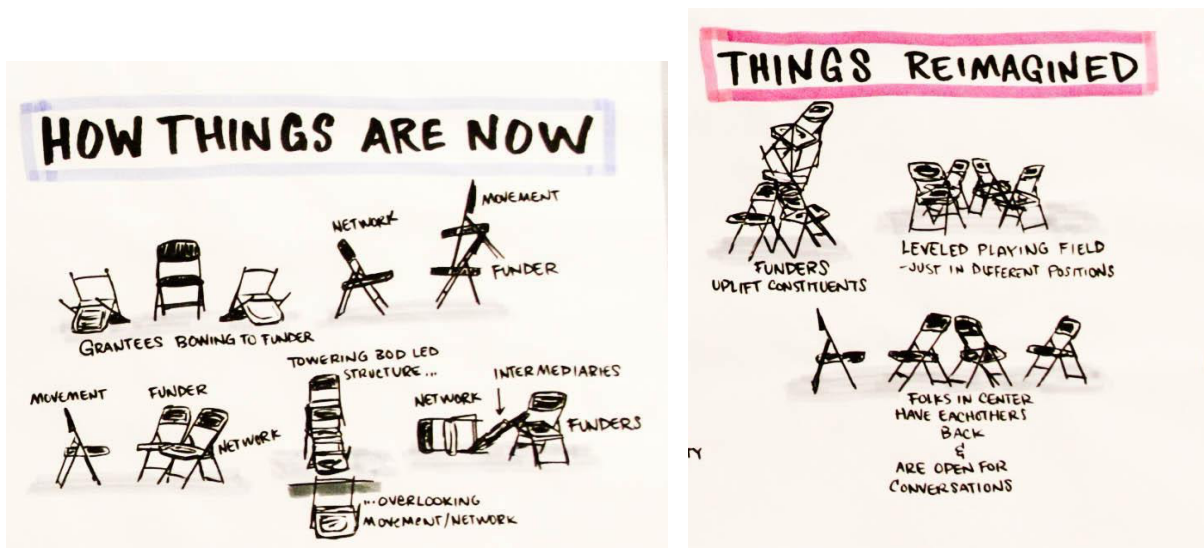
²⁶ See the Appendix for the principles we used to guide our collaboration with others.

²⁷ *Leading Systems Change: A Workbook for Community Practitioners and Funders* by Heather McLeod Grant. <https://www.openimpact.io/leading-systems-change>

²⁸ *Waking Up To All of Ourselves: Inner Work, Social Justice, & Systems Change* by Sheryl Petty. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/waking-up-to-all-of-ourselves-inner-work-social-justice-systems-change/>

our approach to the work. For example, we pivoted from a network research scan to a convening, then from a 20-person discussion to a multi-day gathering of over 60 people.

- **We took on the challenge of attending to transformation at multiple levels - individual, group, and field.** Participants had space to practice inner work and interpersonal work in pairs and small groups. They brought in connections to individuals and organizations outside the space, and weaved that knowledge into our conversations about resource needs at the field level.
- **We created a space that reflected a broader system of networks, funders and intermediaries working towards equity.** A goal of the convening was for people to feel the ecosystem of individuals and organizations working in and resourcing networks within the space and bringing together funders, intermediaries, and network leaders across networks. We collected questions that illuminated pain points and opportunities about the system(s) that shape networks and how they are resourced. In one exercise, we used chairs to help illuminate power dynamics across the system.



An illustration of participants' current views of the system and how we might reimagine it with chairs. Graphic Recording by Brandon Black.

Because of our approach, we've created a network of participants with the relationship, common understanding and experience to connect again beyond this space (there is talk of a participant-initiated Bay Area gathering soon).

A Summary of Our Learnings

Learnings: Questions that Emerged

We focused the two-day session on the three learning questions below. During the convening, we generated a host of questions on topics ranging from network infrastructure, to self-organizing, to shifting power.²⁹

²⁹ See Appendix for a complete list of learning questions generated across the two days.

- *How have funders and other organizations worked together in networks that promote equity and systems change?*
- *What are the barriers to resourcing networks for equitable systems change?*
- *What is the personal work and way of being needed to fully engage in networks, equity and systems change?*

Learnings: Key Themes and Lessons Shared by Participants

How Funders Operate in Networks

Different conceptions of how change happens, how funders define scale, and evaluate success are getting in the way of resourcing networks in aligned, consistent, and mutually reinforcing ways.

As we think about shifting systems, some practitioners and funders focus on incremental change to repair broken systems, others seek to create entirely new systems and practices. Both perspectives are important for driving change; however, they can cause conflict within and across organizations. For example, when and how do we measure impact or scale - is it how many or how deep?; how are we measuring success?; when and how (if at all) do we trade on our long-term vision for short-term wins, etc.?

Program officers can name power differentials within in a network, but the struggle is how to manage them.

A common thread across the two days was the importance of naming power differentials between funders and other network participants. While many funders are able to name this power difference, they are grappling with the calculus of how to address it. When should funders be at the table, and when do they need their own table? When funders are meeting on their own, how do they stay accountable to the networks they are resourcing? When do funders need to get out of the way? When do funders need to take a stance to promote deeper equity?³⁰

Putting equity at the center of funder-grantee relationships:

- **Network grantees as guests.** One funder offered the metaphor of host and guest as a way to center equity and addressing power dynamics between funders and grantees. In this framework, the funder is a host and the grantee is a guest treated with hospitality and honor. This includes doing unglamorous tasks as a funder (e.g., taking notes), honoring grantees' gifts, taking the heat when something goes wrong, walking the talk, and investing in long-term relationship building.
- **There are power differences among grantees within a network, and funders can address them or exacerbate them.** Many participants shared stories about the role of funders in creating processes that seemed equal, but ultimately inequitable across networked organizations. For example, in many stories funders ignored or insufficiently addressed the differences in funding,

³⁰ See Building Movement Projects report, *Recognizing All Families to Expand Our Movements: Insights from the Family Justice Network* for specific examples of how a funders stance on equity impacted the success of the Family Justice Network. <https://buildingmovement.org/reports/recognizing-all-families-to-expand-our-movements-insights-from-the-family-justice-network-2/>

size, power, scale, organizational make-up and demographics across organizations within a network. In these cases, “treating every organization the same” exacerbated inequities.

“They need us as much as we need them.” Healing and repairing the ecosystem is critical to supporting relationships between funders and the networks they are resourcing.

Funders have a role within networks, as do network leaders. The key to healing and repair for one participant was lifting up the mutuality of this relationship: “It’s as old as dirt that we believed and have seen all through time that all things are related. You’re either in good relationship with your community or good relationship with the natural world, or you’re not, and there are consequences.” What does it look like for philanthropy to be in good relationship with community? What is the responsibility of grassroots organizations to support learning in philanthropy on how to invest resources?

Network Assumptions and Shapes

Strict, institutionalized definitions of networks leave out important work from more informal, but powerful networks.

There are tensions in the field about what “counts” as a network. Specifically, non-institutionalized networks are often made invisible and under-resourced. For example, for many years researchers noted that civic engagement has decreased with dwindling participation in rotary clubs or political party groups. In reality, civic engagement in informal networks -- such as Black Lives Matter, community organizing groups, Facebook groups etc. -- is increasing.³¹ Rachel O’Leary Carmona and Allen Kwabena Frimpong presented on the different networks and shared how definitions of networks that are too narrow or that depend on an institutionalization can obscure important movement work.

Networks are not necessarily place-based.

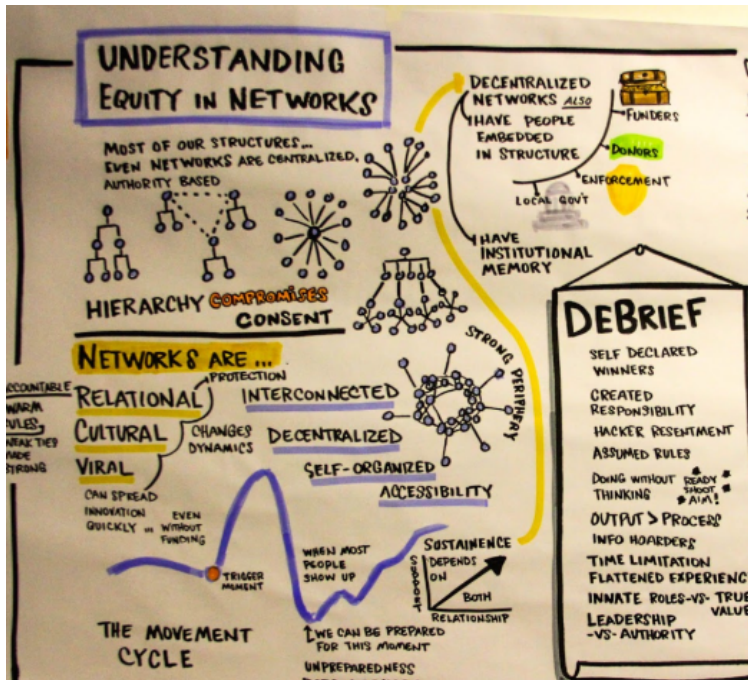
We discussed differences between organizations, networks, movements, and communities, as well as the challenge of moving beyond geographic, place-based conceptions of networks.

Starfish (rather than spider) networks have the potential to regenerate and grow from hardship.³²

In this metaphor, the spider represents incremental change - crawling up the waterspout and being knocked down again when the rain comes. The questions of how to build, resource and structure networks to be more like starfish came up often. Unlike spiders, starfish can thrive on sea and land and have the capacity to regrow lost limbs.

³¹ See presentation on Networks by Allen Kwabena Frimpong and Rachel Carmona O’Leary: https://changeelemental.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AdAstra-Collective_Understanding-Networks2019.pdf

³² See Ori Brafman’s book, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Starfish_and_the_Spider



Graphic Recording by Brandon Black.

Networks' Capacity, Impact, and Infrastructure Needs

Building the capacity to accept (and support) experimentation, conflict, and failure within networks is critical to supporting their development.³³

Many participants spoke to the importance of funding conflict and failure in networks. Part of the strength of networks is the possibility for different groups to test out different approaches while acting with a unified purpose and vision. Funders can support networks in managing tensions and failure, and translating them into learning that can be shared across a network without judgement.

“Relationships are big impact. Relationships are big infrastructure.”

In an interview between two network funders, they discussed the importance of relationships in network building. When they ask grantees in networks what they need, they continuously lift up the importance of relationships. Relationships can support network infrastructure and/or take the place of some infrastructure. It is important for a network to be in service to building relationships between people. Many funders underscored the significant amount of time and resources required to build the depth of relationship needed to sustain networks to which they belong. Often, this means sustained funding for convenings over multiple years so that people learn to be in regular communication with each other.

Networks led by people of color don't unequivocally need leadership development. “We need ecosystem development centered on leaders of color” that addresses structural racism.

³³ The Network Weaver Learning Lab feasibility study provides a discussion of what it might take to create a network space for shared experimentation. The lab, which was organized through a partnership between Compass Point and Change Elemental, brought together 16 network leaders working to address relationship-based violence—and other intersectional issues—to learn collectively and rethink strategies for creating change. <https://www.compasspoint.org/capacity-building-lessons-network-weaver-learning-lab>

In one spark story, a funder sought to support a network of organizations led by women of color. The funders planned to offer them extensive resources for technical assistance - fundraising support, professional development, etc. -- the leaders pushed back. They didn't need TA - they were resourceful and capable leaders with the capacity to figure out what they needed to do and how to do it. Instead, what they wanted was a space and resources to talk about the ecosystem level barriers they were facing as women of color operating in a network together. This included conversations about why their organizations are systemically underfunded and what are the conditions that pit them against each other, and how they might work together in greater solidarity in the face of structural racism. Their second request was that funders have their own separate discussion about these challenges, and that the two groups - funders and network participants - identify how they might shift the ecosystem together.

Networks need to talk about money - our individual relationship to money - and funders need to be part of those conversations as well.

For one network, distributing resources across organizations within the network required challenging conversations about money between network leaders and organizations. Network participants started by asking about their earliest memories of money, their social class and mobility, and how their relationships with money intersected with other aspects of their identity, including race. While these conversations were critical in supporting decision making around resource distribution, these processes often go unfunded, and the emotional labor of managing these hard discussions often fall on Black women.

Networks need to talk about race and power. Funders distributing resources need to be having those conversations as well.

Race and power underpin how organizations within networks relate to each other. Making space for these conversations is a first step in building the trust and relationship needed for healthy networks. Oftentimes, funders will resource a network to have conversations about power, but exclude the funding organization to the detriment of deeper relationships and opportunities to better manage power discrepancies.

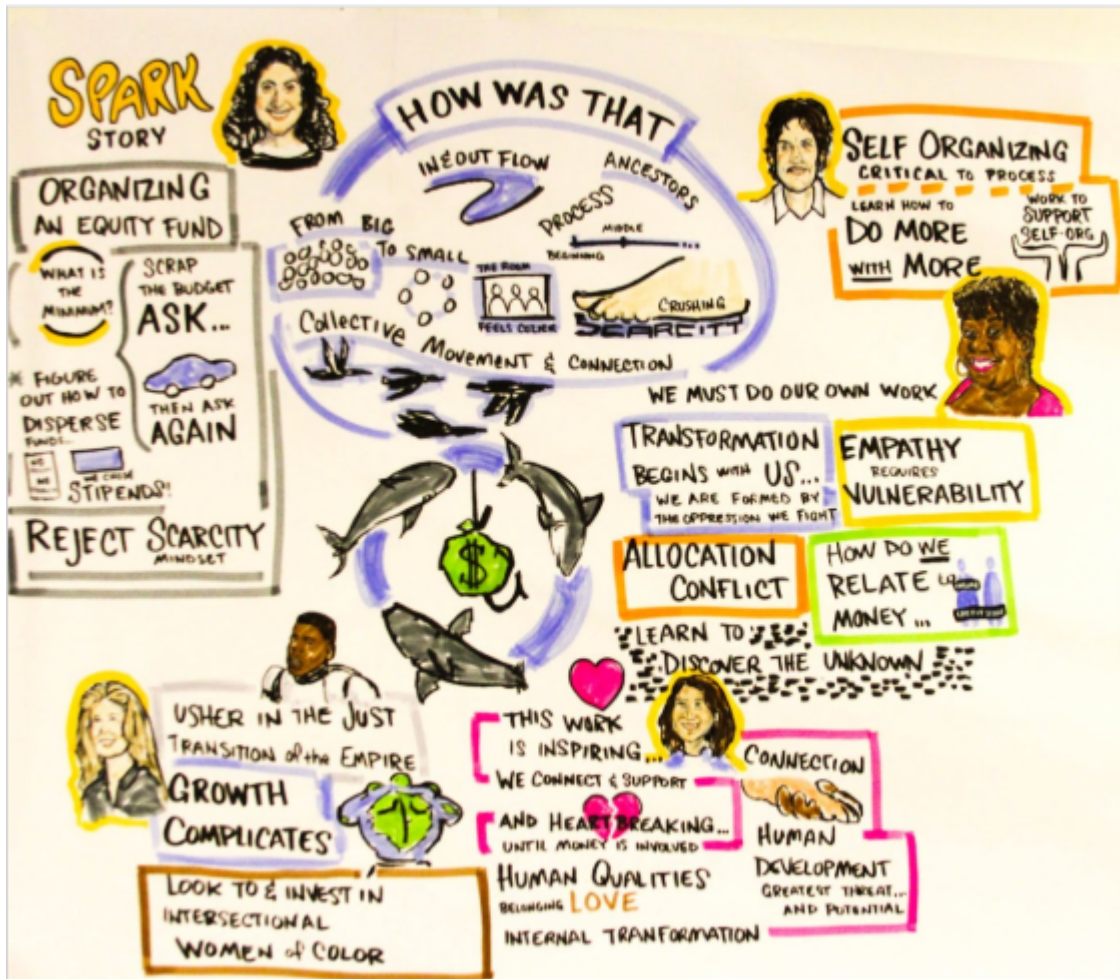
Recognize and support women of color, including Black and Indigenous women and femmes, doing emotional labor, and prioritizing healing in network.

Networks require strong relationships that have the capacity to heal and transcend systems of oppression in the outside world. The burden of relational work often falls on people and women of color (specifically Black and Indigenous women) who often hold the role of healers and caretakers within the networks they are part of. Considering equitable compensation for this work would be one step in supporting this critical work. Another opportunity to consider is how cis men and white men in particular might share more of this labor.

Ways of Being Needed to Build, Resource, and Support Networks

Transformation starts with individuals who are doing the work of transforming themselves.

Talking about race, power and money is not sufficient without inner transformation - the willingness to align our interior conditions with the change we want to see in the world. As one participant shared, "as is the action, so is the fruit," the work we do in the world is a reflection of who we are as individuals. Many participants described the need for personal healing. The people who are fighting oppression and injustice are also often victims of the same systems they are trying to shift. How can funders create the space and resources for individual healing and transformation as a critical step in equitable systems change?



Graphic Recording by Brandon Black.

Opportunities for the Field

True systems change efforts do not merely change inequitable structures, but strive to transform the underlying power dynamics, narratives, and histories that built these structures in the first place and enable them to persist. An equity lens is essential to systems change efforts to avoid change efforts that reinstitute the status quo, or replace one set of systemic inequities with another.

Pathways for transformation that do not embrace equity and intersectionality across issues and movements will continue to be unsuccessful, and will reinforce the current challenges. The following emerging opportunities for funders arose from our convening and the surrounding process.

Support the leadership of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) in networks.

The gathering included a diverse group of funders and networks leaders of color. Some spoke to the loneliness of being the only funder of color in the room or person trying to shift resourcing networks towards more equity-centered practice. Supporting BIPOC leadership goes beyond listening politely to people's ideas, it may include shifting how decision making and power are held, and practicing trust in the decisions of BIPOC leadership. It may also mean white allies in foundations taking risks that put their own power in jeopardy to make room for and reinforce the leadership of their Black and brown colleagues.

Start a community of practice for funders focused on healing and humanity.

The theme of healing came up often over the course of the convening - in order to support whole networks, we need to be whole people. Funders shared about their own struggles navigating accountability to their institutions and accountability to the communities they fund. They are often at the center of tensions between dominant culture practices for funding and more liberatory alternatives.³⁴ To support these funders and strengthen their work of building alternative systems, Uma Viswanathan is hosting a community of practice for funders that will meet several times in 2020 to explore practices for healing and resilience when operating at the center of funding systems.

Fund learning gatherings and networking.

There is power in continued in-person conversations and trusting leaders to come up with their own solutions. Funding for learning is essential. Participants from the equitable systems change gathering plan to host a second convening for participants who are local to the Bay Area to continue to explore some of the questions we raised around resourcing networks with the support of LLC.

Amplify learning from the convening.

We have several hours of video footage from the gathering, and one-on-one interviews with participants. Some highlights are captured in this report, but there is so much more to share with the field. We are exploring other potential opportunities for sharing these learnings in the future, including a longer video report from the two days.

³⁴ *White Dominance and Inclusion: Spectrums of Organizational Characteristics* from Change Elemental offers some examples of dominant culture vs. liberatory practices. This work is adapted largely from the works of Tema Okun, Kenneth Jones, and Partners for Collaborative Change. <https://changeelemental.org/resources/kicking-the-habits-of-white-supremacy-culture/>

Appendix

Feasibility Study from the Network Weaver Learning Lab

Launched in 2017, the Network Weaver Learning Lab was an 18-month program that created a space for leaders to develop their thinking and practice, and to explore and experiment together on ways to advance the movement to end relationship-based violence.

Co-created by sixteen California-based network leaders, along with the lab designers, the lab has been a place of challenging, collaborative, fearless, alive, open and loving exchanges that get to root causes, while maintaining a radical systems-perspective—one that embraces the past without being constrained by it, one that deepens and amplifies all the transformational work already taking place.

It was not about imparting a set of skills and lessons that are predetermined and prescriptive, but rather cultivating the synergy that comes from bringing together network leaders' strengths, and creating opportunities for them to draw on each other to build and amplify their work. It supported participants in centering relationships, holding an experimental stance, and deepening their capacity to work in emergence. The lab featured four in-person convenings, personal and group experiments, coaching, and other supports. Read more about the lab here: <https://changeelemental.org/learning-project/network-weaver-learning-lab/>

Principles for Networked Leadership

Developed by Aja Couchois Duncan at Change Elemental.



Principles to Guide Us

Adapted from the Network Leadership Innovation Lab: <https://changeelemental.org/learning-project/network-leadership-innovation-lab/>

- **Co-create:** Our meeting is being developed in an iterative co-creation process; therefore, we own the space together. An Advisory Group collectively formed the goals, principles, the agenda, and invitee list. Whatever, if anything, comes next will emerge from the group or a subset of the group.
- **Think and Act as Leaders:** Understanding that no one actor can achieve systemic social change alone, we wish to think and act together as leaders holding a field or movement perspective. We also expect that we will each reflect and bring all the wisdom, experience, and knowledge we have from our institutional positions/roles, while also reaching out beyond those boundaries.
- **Showing Up As Our Whole Selves:** We wish to bring our full selves to the conversation, and invite each of us to talk honestly and transparently about the issues and constraints that we experience.
- **Name Power Dynamics:** We acknowledge that each funder and justice leader are actors in movement ecosystems. As such, we each occupy different places within the ecosystem, and bring different types and amounts of power to the work. We seek to name power dynamics openly so that we can see the opportunities that best wield and build the power we do have.
- **Acknowledge and Transverse Current Constraints:** We recognize that all participants also operate within a set of institutional constraints. We seek to understand these constraints and the limitations they impose, while at the same time we seek to identify new ways we may have impact individually and collectively.
- **Tender Transparency:** The purpose of this space is to learn and share that learning broadly with others. We will share in ways that honors our learning, our relationships with each other, and our individual and collective contributions.
- **Be Honest, Authentic, and Vulnerable:** For this space to work, we ask that you come into the space willing to share authentically what you experience and see. That means saying what hasn't worked, as well as what has; going to the edge of our own understanding; and articulating your unanswered questions.
- **Openness:** We are willing to be pushed and push ourselves about what we might be able to do or do differently.
- **Moving Beyond the Status Quo:** We aim to uncover new opportunities to act both individually and possibly, collectively. This means allowing ourselves to think broadly while also identifying practical action.

Learning Questions from the Field

Questions transcribed from post-it notes shared by participants at the convening.

Imagination - What might the future be?

- What does radical imagination look like for networks?
- What creative imagining and co-creation can we do to build cross movement infrastructure?
- How can networks and funders reimagine funding for movement networks?

Urgency and Time in Current Context

- We don't have much time and we need to slow down. How do we manage the tension of urgent needs while slowing down?

Diverse Composition

- How can we create meaning-making, understanding/perceptions of roles, if mindsets may look really different across generations?
- Who else is now showing up on the map?

Size and Growth

- Since networks require pauses, generosity with time - how many is too many? Especially as more people get excited and start more and are trying to connect.
- How important is it for networks to start small? How does the concept of fractiles play into the health of networks?
- How do we balance between deepening connections in a network while keeping the network open to growth and new participants?

Where are people - especially impacted communities - gathering outside of traditional avenues/organizations and more loosely and deeply connected in community?

- How to lift up the invisible impacted communities?

Movements and Networks

- Do we hold a common understanding of: Movements, Networks, Building power?
- What is the relationship between networks and movements?
- In what ways are networks ecosystems? How are networks different from ecosystems?
- What is the role of organizations in movement building?
- Who is working on movement infrastructure? How can we maximize efforts with building what is needed?
- How do we know that networks are the vehicle through which we can achieve systems change and equity? How do they make a difference?

Distributing Resources and the Funder Landscape

- How might we gather money for community leaders and members to review grants and choose/have self-determination?
- What is the impact of resource distribution on relationships within networks, and how might it be a transformative process?
- How might we best understand who is funding networks for equitable systems change?
- How do networks decide how resources are distributed? What are some conditions and/or best practices?

- How are the structures of far-right funding models different compared to “progressive” ones?

Right Relationship with Philanthropy

- What is grantees’ role in demanding change?
- What do funders seeking to make institutional change need from the field? What do funders really want to know about supporting our work? How can we (grantees) help you all (funders) unlock money to fund networks equitably?
- How might we push our own institutions within philanthropy?
- How are people in philanthropy struggling with role and hierarchy?
- Is it worth trying to reform philanthropy vs building a new paradigm (beliefs, structures, practices) for resources to be generated and governed?
- Are we just trying to hack philanthropy instead of dismantling it as part of capitalism?
- Is true solidarity and right relationship actually possible between funders and movements?
- Does the hierarchical nature of funding/funders fundamentally disrupt/disallow/destroy decentralized networks?
- How might we explore our relationships to money-giving and receiving as generative ideas and as fractal for resourcing networks?

Dismantling Oppression

- When addressing root causes rather than symptoms of problems, “cross system” relationships are critical, but it’s hard to find funders to support this work - what’s the answer? How can this work be resourced?
- How does the concept of “practice” relate to transformation/dismantling systems of oppression?

Self-organizing, Network Organizing

- What are the types of investments, tools, etc. needed to foster types of “flat” networks?
- We tend to skip the learning component in the self-organizing phases - how do we make sure learning is part of self-organizing?

Network Models and Structures

- How do we balance the “tyranny of structureless” with the “tyranny of over structured networks?”
- How are decisions made in decentralized networks? How do you create the culture and vehicles for communication that helps people find each other and spread innovation?
- How do you decentralize a network that starts off with a traditional structure?
- What are more expansive, creative network structures?
- How do we think about what networks are designed to do inside a context that is ever changing?
- Are there more types or locations/configurations of networks that support movements than the four we saw today? Are we able to keep naming creative options/pros/cons/etc.?
- What permission do people need to move between structured and unstructured, or centralized or decentralized?

Who are we - where do we go?

- Should we keep practicing and learning together? What is the purpose or constellation for us in the room beyond today?
- How might we collectively gather as funders?

- What are we most excited about?
- What is the needed shift to go from “Vegas Rules” to trusting each other with “tender stories?”

Equity

- What does it look like to practice equity - in a self-organized system as it relates to generating and distributing resources?
- How can networks that are not grounded in movement or an explicit political frame center equity, and build racial equity process muscle in these spaces? In the US context, this includes red-blue, legacy non-profits, etc.

Resources and Resourcing

- How can we tap more of our latent resources for the movement as a whole (beyond crisis moments)?
- What are concrete success stories about changing funding approach?
- What are, where are, how do we organize and share... the resources that support structural transformation?

Being

- How do we work on how to “Be” and not necessarily a final destination?
- How do we do the decolonization/renunciation that makes the “I” separate from the “we?” E.g., the idea of recognizing how many networks had to happen to make you and your work happen.
- What is the inner work that allows us to do this work?
- In movement building work, we don’t get enough time to just “be” in space without it feeling like “work.” When we do, it’s so infrequent that we binge on content, too often losing much of what was provided. How do we incorporate sessions where we can just “be” more frequently as a part of sustaining movement work?
- What are the connections between personal transformation and institutional transformation - enabling or dis-enabling conditions?

Relationships

- As movements grow and scale, how do we maintain the integrity of relationships and connections at scale?

Building and Shifting Power

- How do we use liberated practices (on the margins/periphery) to shift centralized power in philanthropy?
- How might we be more intentional about the five elements of transformation toward justice and liberating practice?
- How do we further explore the many ways to build power: Economic, Political, Spiritual, Social?

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