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# Weaving an Impactful Network

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*Keywords:* Funder theory of change, funder/grantee network weavers, funder and grantee backbone organizations, cross-issue impact

In 2011, the world watched as tens of thousands of Wisconsinites descended upon the state Capitol to protest devastating legislation that stripped values enshrined a century ago in the state's legislative code. In contrast, outside of public view and with support from a state-based donor, dozens of nonprofits had spent five years experimenting with strategies to increase their collective impact. In this single catalytic event of 2011, their growing alignment focused the capacity of organizations and coalitions within a network toward a collective agenda to protect the state's social compact. This network of coalitions, now established as Wisconsin Voices, is working to revive and excite year-round civic participation in support of Wisconsin's values.

## Context

In 2005, the Wisconsin-based Brico Fund initiated a new funding strategy and decided that funding alone was not enough to strengthen the impact of its grantmaking. Believing that single organizations – while often providing quality programs and services – were not creating the systemic change they sought, Brico began experimenting with a more integrated funding strategy: funding capacity building and leveraging power and relationships. Twice-annual funding cycles no longer drove timing of gifts. Program-issue silos no longer drove grantmaking priorities. However, various issue priorities became frames for integration of funding for community organizing, advocacy, policy, messaging, and capacity building, includ-

## Key Points

- The Brico Fund set out to test a common non-profit theory of change: individual outputs lead to outcomes, leading to systems change. An alternate theory is that systems change happens through collective and strategic action of many organizations working together toward a common goal.
- This case study examines the implementation of this theory and describes the companion development of systems, structures, tools, and processes created in a cross-sector network of nonprofits. The evolution of Brico's funding strategy is juxtaposed with the development of the network, revealing a unique funder/organization symbiosis, relying on each to provide expertise, thus fostering achievement of both their individual and mutual goals.
- Brico has six years of experience, testing, evaluation, and impact that demonstrates collective action is more effective. The metamorphosis resulting from putting theory into practice is changing the local nonprofit community. For grantmakers interested in leading in a different way, key learnings are shared.

ing leadership development. Brico moved from a foundation legal structure to a limited liability corporation in order to act more quickly and with less formal process, including the elimination of formal dockets and board meetings. And it sought out atypical organizations, understanding that community change happens in many places.

*An “aha” moment occurred with the recognition that funding limitations around projects, outputs and outcomes aligned only for organizational reporting, and the need to work within 12-month reporting cycles were contributing to ineffectiveness and paralysis in the sector.*

From a systems-change perspective, the Brico Fund is interested in policy change. After listening closely to their grantees, they learned that policy-change efforts were thwarted by little to no messaging/communications capacity, and by few or uncoordinated civic engagement efforts with people most impacted. In effect, organizations were not equipped to initiate policy changes or defend current practice, partly because issue-based funders often didn't fund in the areas of civic engagement and communications. Instead, Brico learned, organizations did the best they could, driven in part by a funding system that did not recognize organizational capacities necessary for policy change. With the realization that organizations needed to possess those capacities to be successful change agents, or partner with organizations that did, Brico created a new funding strategy to facilitate and reward alignment and integration. For many, the strategy supported and incited organizations to experiment with new ways to create change.

This case study begins by framing the evolution of the network design and defining the Brico theory of change. It also describes the companion development of systems, structures, tools, and processes in the participating nonprofit community. This catalyzed the creation of Wisconsin Voices, a nonprofit network including many Brico grantees, revealing a unique funder/organization symbiosis that allows both entities to achieve

their individual and mutual goals. The evolution of Brico's funding strategy and leadership role in the community is juxtaposed with the visioning and creation of Wisconsin Voices.

In 2002, Brico analyzed its funding impact from the prior 10 years and was disappointed in the lack of sustainable change beyond good outcomes for individuals participating in programs. Soon after, Brico examined its funding strategy and sought input of many others – intentionally building relationships with grantees and funding partners in the process. As trust between them developed over time, a vision began to emerge of creating tangible impact beyond individual programmatic outcomes. An “aha” moment occurred with the recognition that funding limitations around projects, outputs and outcomes aligned only for organizational reporting, and the need to work within 12-month reporting cycles were contributing to ineffectiveness and paralysis in the sector.

With many nonprofits eager to pursue the idea, in 2005, Brico championed a series of convenings with more than 100 organizational leaders. The result was a plan to create a network with the capacity to shape public debate around values and issues, to build an engaged citizenry actively working for community involvement and change, and to enhance democracy by engaging disproportionately underrepresented constituencies. The project was designed to strengthen and build new capacity; to harness, enhance, and interconnect existing advocacy organizations for deeper impact; and to create new partnerships to leverage broader change.

The Brico Fund believes that systems change happens through collective and strategic action of organizations working together toward a common goal. Brico's theory of change is to build the strength and sustainability of individual organizations and their leaders to do their work more effectively, efficiently, and with greater sustainability (Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, 2003).

But to be effective in driving change, Brico understands that each organization must be

strong in leadership, mission focus, and operations – including the effective use of technology. Brico actualizes its theory of change by making general support grants for operations and technical assistance or capacity building in individual organizations. Simultaneously, Brico provides similar support to larger networks and coalitions to design and create sustainable frames for collective action.

Brico's theory of change tests the power dynamic of the traditional funding partnership in two ways: First, it relies on grant partners in whom it invests to be the experts in achieving system or policy impact. Brico itself is structured to convene, facilitate, and weave strategies, and leverage partnerships and relationships that support the power of its grantees. Just as important, for those organizations eager to become experts but not yet there, Brico facilitates peer learning and access to support resources.

Second, Brico believes strong leaders lead strong organizations, and that emerging leaders require investment in training and long-term development. Brico invests in those leaders and in the capacity-building needs of their organizations, with the expectation that the resulting alignment will create effectiveness. Brico values succession planning and expects its grantees to do so as well.

### **The Beginning: How Capacity-Building Funding Supported the Foundation of a Network**

Throughout this inquiry phase, Brico continued to make operating grants. However, after learning from the nonprofit community that siloed project funding with conflicting evaluation and outcomes requirements was paralyzing its ability to achieve its goals, Brico changed its strategy and realigned funding priorities to become more responsive to the needs of organizations. As Mario Morino and Bill Shore (2004) explain in “High-Engagement Philanthropy: A Bridge to a More Effective Social Sector,” strategic assistance is a common form of grantor engagement.

At the same time, Brico became clear and intentional about transparent and relational leader-

ship, effective governance, and capacity-building needs necessary for partnerships to flourish. As relationships evolved, plans became more focused on possibilities for the future. Together, Brico and grantees identified barriers to impact despite objectives being reached, disappointments of traditional planning and structures, fragmented messaging and rivalry for attention, and the debilitating sense of funding competition. Based on what they learned, Brico reframed its inquiry about core issues such as:

- diversity on and generative thinking by boards of directors, ensuring boards reflected constituencies of the organization and were continually planning toward the future;
- executive and emergency succession planning, creating a new paradigm that strong organizations plan for transition and new leadership is celebrated;
- organizational and financial commitment to leadership development opportunities for staff, recognizing that too many nonprofit leaders move into leadership roles without skills, experiences, or support necessary to succeed;
- best practices and evidence that the organization is continually learning, innovating, and sharing learning with peers, creating a culture of cooperation, not competition; and
- annual fundraising and strategic plans, ensuring organizations strive toward goals, not merely work hard without focus.

While continuously probing, listening, incorporating feedback, and soliciting new ideas from grantees, Brico began making more capacity-building grants for planning, leadership development, technology, evaluation, and training. Over time, a clear difference emerged in the funding relationship. Brico began to see alternatives in which core grantees wanted to tackle their issues and plans by working together with shared goals. Brico responded by funding shared projects, including funding for planning time to develop

and initiate collective projects. Those not willing to intentionally strengthen their own capacity stopped applying for support or began to drop from the funding portfolio.

Brico was transparent and consistent in articulating its vision. Plastrik and Taylor (2006) indicate that it is not unusual for a funder to offer a solution rather than simply fund organizations. They further state that organizations not wanting to work in the manner the funder desires can choose to not seek their financial support. In their analysis of factors critical to implementing a collective impact approach to social change, Hanleybrown, Kania and Kramer (2012) describe the role Brico was playing as the funder-based backbone organization. Brico's leadership brought groups to the table to consider different ways of engaging with one another, and provided critical funding to allow new partners time and safe space to explore working together. That funding opened doors to other funders and reoccurring resources over time allowed grantee organizations to develop collective capacity.

### Evolution: From Coordination to a Network of Networks

The Wisconsin Voices network that developed from planning initiated by Brico began as a coordinated effort. Coordination became more intentional, leading to collaboration, which fueled a drive for collective action, resulting in an intentional network bent on change. A review of the literature finds evolution from a core idea to coordination and collaboration well described (Winer & Ray, 1994; Mattessich, Murray-Close, Monsey, & Center, 2001). Networks, too, have been defined (Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2012; Krebs & Holley, 2006). After six years of work, Wisconsin Voices today is emerging as a network of networks. We call it "Network<sup>2</sup>," a concept we do not yet find described in the organization-development literature.

Critical to this success is the patience, steadiness, and resolve of the Brico Fund – the long-standing provider of financial resources and philosophic support. Following is a description of:

- each phase along the path to Network<sup>2</sup>,
- innovations developed within each phase, and
- Brico's reaction and evolution of its thinking on funding the network and organizations within in it.

#### *Phase 1: Wisconsin Voices Coordination*

The first phase of implementation is best described as a coordinated effort. A steering committee of five organization leaders emerged from the 2005 planning process. Because each committee member had full-time responsibilities to their own organization, they presented a plan to Brico to hire a convener to bring together groups conducting 501(c)(3)-allowable civic engagement programs. Their purpose: to develop a collaborative plan educating voters and to conduct voter engagement activities motivating those from historically underrepresented communities to exercise their right to vote. The position was housed in an existing organization to conserve financial resources, ensure employee benefits, and provide other institutional support.

A second crucial component of the coordination phase was development of a powerful tool – the civic engagement file, a database that contains a record of every registered voter. It identified which of the organizations' members were registered to vote and, if registered, who voted and in which elections. From this valuable information, groups could design targeted education campaigns for their constituencies.

The convener assisted in developing voter education plans, provided training in use of the civic engagement file, facilitated sharing of plans to avoid duplication among the same constituencies, and helped them share best practices. In that first year, six organizations participated in this cooperative effort focusing on low-income women and African American, Latino, and Hmong constituencies.

After the first year, an analysis by the steering committee found that housing the convener within an existing organization that had its own mission and specific constituency was constraining the host organization. The committee

restructured, creating a neutral presence to lead the project that was now governed as a fiscally sponsored project. Much like a board/executive director relationship, the convener reported to the steering committee. Brico participated in some committees, brainstorming and planning, which created buy-in and support to continue funding this evolving plan.

*Phase 1 innovations:* The partnership of funder/nonprofit backbone leadership was organically emerging. Based on mutual respect for roles and expertise, organization leaders created common plans and innovations. A convener began facilitating collective efforts. Brico funded portions of those plans within its programmatic interests and facilitated relationships with other funders to encourage their financial support.

*Brico Fund reflection:* Brico modeled the change it expected to see in its grantees. During this period, Brico was an informed validator for the emerging collaboration, supporter of the process, and financial supporter of the convener and file.

Simultaneously, Brico financially supported individual organizations, leveraged other financial resources, and provided local credibility for a new way of achieving impact. Concurrently, they encouraged grantees to build organizational effectiveness around board leadership, succession planning, a diversified funding base, and strategic planning. At the same time, they watched for inspiring and accountable leadership to further drive transformation.

Brico made an intentional decision to allow the nascent network freedom to wonder and struggle through its decision making and determine its own way. Brico's role was the supporter, allowing the group to develop and to "crawl [to] connect and align" so that it could learn to walk (Plastrik & Taylor, 2006, p. 65). In learning how to partner with grantees, Brico decided it could "create still more value if [it moved] from the role of capital provider to the role of fully engaged partner, thereby improving the grantee's effectiveness as an organization" (Porter & Kramer, 1999, p. 123).

Brico changed its legal status to an LLC and moved beyond a program officer staffing model. With a new culture of adaptive leadership, issue and skills expertise was sought in funded organizations, not with Brico staff. Brico's role evolved, based on a strong history of respect, to a backbone role of building relationships and introducing unlikely alliances. Trust grew to introduce new organizations to the emerging system. Likewise, Brico's living donor, who expected to see change in her lifetime, encouraged early funding. She encouraged risk taking in that funding, and normalized the need to make mistakes in order to discover.

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#### *Phase 2: Wisconsin Voices Collaboration Emerges*

The newly named Wisconsin Civic Engagement Project brought together those who had coordinated activities in 2006. Their initial priority was to expand participant organizations with constituencies from communities of color, young first-time voters, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community.

In addition to creating a collaborative plan, the expanded coalition created a common message and printed materials. Work was divided, flyers and mail pieces were developed, and a common metric to evaluate their work was created. The

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project convener helped new partner organizations learn the skills to conduct grassroots civic engagement. Collaborative work broadened to include community issues such as protecting the local water supply and revitalizing an economically devastated neighborhood.

The convener raised funds for collaborative plans. Money raised was regranted and paid for joint printing, mailing, and training costs (Wisconsin Civic Engagement Project, 2009).

*Phase 2 innovations:* Coordination evolves to collaboration. New constituency organizations are engaged and mentored by more experienced participants. Multiple projects create opportunities for a series of coalitions with participating organizations spanning constituencies, each addressing a different issue. Work is integrated and participants hold each other mutually accountable. New forms of capacity building support are provided.

*Brico Fund reflection:* As Brico continues its investment, it becomes clear that some organizations are more nimble and interested in adapting to change than others. The Fund is careful not to “shoot the messenger” when it learns of challenges. When an organization is ready for further growth, Brico, using a carrot rather than a stick, gives capacity building grants in addition to the general operating grants it currently makes. Investments in board governance, financial management, strategic planning, program evaluation, and leadership development increase. Through

ongoing trust building, Brico works to create a culture of transparency, asking grantees to feel safe in sharing their struggles – with the demonstrated promise of not withholding funding as a consequence of that sharing.

Brico is clear about the kind of nonprofit culture in which it wants to invest. Organizations with different values understand there is not a funding fit. Other funders take note of which organizations Brico funds.

During this phase, Brico reminds itself to stay the course and remain flexible for continued adaptations over the next several years. Brico itself models nimble staffing and process, adapting to change – often in reaction to its grantee partner needs.

Aligning funding for individual organizations and partnering with nonprofits to create new infrastructure requires unique partnership. Such a relationship can be difficult because of the power dynamic inherent between funders and organizations (Buchanan, Bolduc, & Huang, 2004). However, Brico, like Pifer (1997), strongly believes the grantee and grantor relationship is one of give and take – each brings something and receives benefit. In practice, being a funder/partner is difficult and isolating at times, as peer funders and some organizations voice questions about what they perceive as a directive approach. As collaboration increases, even organizations not financially supported by Brico join the project.

As alignment of organizations increases, Brico continually looks for evidence of escalating relationships and trust between leaders and organizations. Anecdotal stories become sufficient evidence of good will, learning, and increased impact. It sees grant partners expecting more from each other. In this phase, Brico listens and offers encouragement and connections to other resources, while leaders work together to build the emerging network. At the same time, Brico relies on support and encouragement from its grantees to stay the course.

### *Phase 3: Wisconsin Voices – A Collaborative Culture*

In *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Benjamin Barber (2003) reflects, “Our democracy belongs to us and to us alone: We make it by making it our own. If we do not, we break it and lose it” (p. xxx). In the third phase of its evolution, this project expanded its definition of civic engagement to include any community efforts to influence public policy with the goal of achieving a society that reflects the common values of the ever-broadening coalition.

The project had grown to include 54 organizations bringing their voices together to express a common agenda. To better reflect the depth of the work, the name of the project changed to Wisconsin Voices. The work plan expanded to include issue education and advocacy campaigns, and to engage neighborhood groups that had not previously conducted “civic engagement” work. Common values hold the multiple projects together.

Examples of this transformation include:

- a coalition that collaboratively applied for, and was awarded, a two-year grant from a national funder to advocate for job creation;
- a group, working to revitalize an economically distressed neighborhood, that expanded efforts to conduct voter engagement work in the same geographic area;
- creation of a coalition of 22 community-based groups that prepared neighbors for the census count. Wisconsin Voices provided training to build skills to conduct the work and raised and regranted funds to support it. Of those participating, 10 had never before done civic engagement work.
- a funder partner that was willing to help gather other funders.

To assist partner leaders in building their skills and meeting one another, quarterly convenings provided opportunities for networking, training, celebration, and sharing of collaborative projects.

Wisconsin Voices also paid attention to its own organizational development, and qualified as a nonprofit charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service code. The steering committee evolved into a board of directors with new members outside of those participating in the project. The group also began to assess its own impact by conducting a survey to understand perceptions and the usefulness of its services and role (Wisconsin Voices, 2011).

*Phase 3 innovations:* Work has evolved to a series of collaborations connected by a central hub – Wisconsin Voices. As trust builds, collaboration became a way of being. Sanchez (2012) describes this as a collaborative culture: Participating organizations have different missions and constituencies, but common values and principles. Collaboration has become the norm. When a project arises that others might have interest in or can provide a unique attribute for, a convening group automatically reaches out to engage potential partners. Wisconsin Voices’ role is that of a network weaver (Krebs & Holley, 2006), providing opportunities for organizations considering similar work to align across issue, constituency, or geographic boundaries.

*Brico Fund reflection:* Stronger organizations are emerging, coalitions are evolving, and networks are growing. Seeing this, Brico’s funding changes as well to support integrated program work: linking community organizing, advocacy, policy, and communications efforts around a common issue.

The energy around this progress is palpable and Brico is careful not to expect policy wins as the only measurement of success. Instead, continued leadership and organizational development and increased cross-issue, cross-constituency, and cross-geography partnerships are recognized and supported.

The mutually beneficial relationship with grantee partners informs changes in the fund’s application for funding. Partner feedback informs the process and content. The application process becomes simpler.

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*Phase 4: A Network*

In 2011, Wisconsin saw a significant change in the political context. Major changes in state law directly affected the constituencies of Wisconsin Voices partner organizations. These organizations mobilized their members and joined residents from across the state to protest at the state capitol. When public hearings were held, Wisconsin Voices assisted partner organizations in crafting messages to their elected officials.

Organizations evolved from being convened by Wisconsin Voices to becoming the conveners themselves. New collaborations crossing issue and constituency lines addressed health care reform implementation, cuts in public transit, threats to the state's signature child health program, and the protection of fresh water. Coalition efforts became integrated and flowed naturally from issues and advocacy to voter engagement and back.

Wisconsin Voices continues its progress engaging new constituencies. A project for service providers teaches them to educate their clients on how public policy directly affects their lives. A new partnership with a national leadership development organization initiated a coordinated leadership development program and provides grants to two state-based organizations to develop pilots for community internship and mentoring programs.

A new tool has been developed to examine the engagement level of project participants in the network. The 2012 work plan included activities to move groups up the engagement scale (Wisconsin Voices, 2012).

*Phase 4 innovations:* The definition of civic engagement expands and new collaborative projects address many issues. Several collaborative projects transpire at once. Some participating organizations take part in several collaborations at the same time. Collaborative groups evolve into a network. Wisconsin Voices provides more capacity building and leadership development opportunities.

*Brico Fund reflection:* As a collaborative culture matures, Brico becomes even more responsive to organizations' strategies to create change. At the same time, Brico is not distracted by short-term trends. Yet, it stays on the cutting edge of its issue priorities, committing to long-term funding.

The fund begins to experiment with new grant-making strategies that encourage organizations to present an integrated plan and collaborative budget from multiple organizations. Its funding also matures; all grants are now made with an eye to public-policy needs, striving to move the non-profit community away from its reactive posture. And, as a partner, Brico is more active in opening doors for network organizations to raise funds locally and nationally.

As with each phase, Brico again reflects on its evolving role and commits to continue supporting the network as it continues to evolve. On the one hand, Brico maintains its clearly defined approach and is less forgiving of organizations not sharing its stated values around collaboration and collective action. On the other hand, Brico has become very open to considering innovations. While the power dynamic of money will never go away, Brico shares in the risk of creating a new culture of impact. At the same time, Brico understands that it cannot fulfill its mission without the non-profit's power to act.

### *Phase 5: Wisconsin Voices – A Network of Networks*

Wisconsin Voices has grown to more than 90 organizations. It supports multiple-issue priorities among vast differences in organizational sophistication, size, and leadership capacity. It is no longer merely coalitions forming to create and implement collaborative programs. Groups involved in policy development and analysis, community-based organizations, and service providers all bring their own networks to the effort. Collectively they are assertively moving a social agenda around key policy issues.

It is not simply a network; it is a network of networks or Network<sup>2</sup>. To operate in this way and to have an impact requires that participating organizations “work with and through other organizations ... sharing funding, expertise, leadership, power, and credit” (Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2012, p. 128). Impact is tangible – measurable metrics are aligned, cost savings are achieved, and strong leaders and organizations are developed.

Acting as the center of gravity for these collective projects, Wisconsin Voices’ role is behind the scenes, providing services to build capacity in participating organizations. It is about collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Wisconsin Voices plays three key roles:

- *Bridging* – Expanding the depth and breadth of the network as well as connecting organizations with common interests.
- *Bonding* – Coordinating, convening, and facilitating.
- *Capacity building* – Providing resources to enable joint projects to succeed, and individuals and organizations to develop.

*Convening and connecting:* Wisconsin Voices continually identifies organizations with common values that may be interested in joining the network. Once engaged, opportunities to meet across issue, constituency, and geographic boundaries are facilitated.

*Creating collaborative plans:* As groups develop the interest, capacity, or skills to do so, they take

the leadership role for projects. Wisconsin Voices still takes the lead on new projects or issues where no one group has the mission or capacity to initiate the work. The role reversal has been substantial: In phase three (Collaborative Culture), Wisconsin Voices had the lead on approximately 70 percent of the projects; today, partner organizations take the lead 70 percent of the time.

*Providing shared tools and resources:* Housing tools and resources at Wisconsin Voices provides substantial cost savings and, in some cases, makes what would be otherwise unattainable readily accessible. Economies of scale achieved through shared resources include the civic engagement file and staff consulting on use of the file, planning for issue and policy campaigns, developing controlled experiments, and designing of communications strategies. Financial support is provided through collaborative fundraising and grantees.

*Organizational and leadership development:* Training programs are created or acquired based upon the needs of participating organizations. Leadership development programming is provided through partnership with organizations specializing in that work. Network mapping serves as a tool to measure relationships between organizations and to strategically plan network expansion.

It is certain that the network of networks is not done evolving and innovating. Planning and integration, constituencies served, tactics employed, and services provided will evolve in a continual process.

### **Analysis: An Emergent, Adaptive System**

The concept for what has become Wisconsin Voices began with the Brico Fund wanting to leverage its funding for greater impact. Throughout the course of this six-year evolution, the Fund employed new strategies to support, expand, and enhance capacity of participating organizations. Transparency in its work built trust with core grantees.

Crutchfield and McLeod Grant (2012) identify one of the practices of high-impact organizations

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as shifting from an organizational model to a relational model network. The relationship between the Brico Fund, Wisconsin Voices, and other individual organizations evolved and was reinvented. Early on, some organizations participated in Wisconsin Voices solely because Brico encouraged them. They didn't understand how to collaborate but knew they needed to be there to get funding. As they participated in collaborative projects and saw the results, they wanted to be there, as they experienced the power of working together. Over time trust was built – between organizations and between Brico and its grantees.

The symbiotic relationship between Brico and the Wisconsin Voices network has led to a culture that supports cross-organization funder/grantee collaboration and impact. The Brico grantmaking strategy was informed by the evolution of the Wisconsin Voices network and by organizations within it. Grant seekers learned what was important to Brico through the application process and relationship building; attention to relationships was critical.

Brico learned what worked in practice through honest and transparent dialogue, its funding process, and ongoing analysis from grantees. This information then informed Brico's evolving application process. Brico became more sophisticated in its funding and Wisconsin Voices gained greater impact as a provider of services to participating organizations.

In his analogy of organizations functioning as organisms, Morgan (1986) suggests that careful management provided by Brico and Wisconsin

Voices balanced internal needs and allowed for adaptation to the external environment. What has emerged was not planned. There was an assumption that there is no one best way, nor one final way. Their willingness to allow something new to develop organically and to allow new iterations has led to a unique network of networks.

What is created emerges, adapts, and innovates as the context, environment, task at hand, constituencies being served, and groups involved change. This is an iterative, developmental process that spirals upward in sophistication and capacity. Boundaries in phase one were tighter than in phase three for both the organizations and Brico. The relationship between Brico and core grantees has become a true partnership.

Brico provides continued financial resources for Wisconsin Voices' basic operations and has tailored its grantmaking process to lend urgency to continual improvement. All of this change in systems, structures, tools, and processes leads to collective impact (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012), which is different and more powerful than collaboration.

Overall, the system is relational, entrepreneurial, and values driven. In their own ways, the Brico Fund and Wisconsin Voices serve as backbones to the network (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Both Brico and Wisconsin Voices construct platforms to connect, and share ideas and information. Together, they

- act as a bridge to connect organizations to one another and weave a broader network,
- provide opportunities to bond and build trust and serve as neutral conveners, and
- take a visionary stance to assess current work and invite others to join in creating the next iteration.

The result is a flexible, resilient, innovative, and ever-evolving "survival of the fitting" and an invitation to those who want to join.

## What Changed and How Brico Makes Sense of the Metamorphosis

The Brico Fund set out to challenge a common nonprofit theory of change: that individual outputs lead to outcomes, which lead to systems change. Brico did not accept that premise and did not believe that individual organizations, working alone, change systems. While generalization cannot be made from one case, based on its experience as a place-based funder, Brico has six years of experience, testing, evaluation, and impact that demonstrates collective action is more effective. Brico and 90 organizations making up Wisconsin Voices have witnessed the metamorphosis of the local nonprofit community and are heartened. For grantmakers interested in leading in a different way, we conclude by sharing a few key learnings.

### *From Phase 1: Open the Space to Partner for Success*

- Be a catalyst. Connect people and ideas. Agitate; disturb status quo behavior and transactional relationships.
- Practice learning and create safety in working differently. Ask leading questions about gaps, threats, or opportunity for growth in governance, management, leadership, and program.
- Recognize growth and change happen at different speeds. Be patient and tolerant of continual progress, and recognize that there may be very good reasons if work stalls. Tolerate uncertainty.
- Celebrate and recognize short-term success and champion learning from the inevitable mistakes.
- Invest. Provide financial resources to initiate and sustain progress. Stay the course.

### *From Phase 2: Planning Must Lead to Execution*

- Embrace the unknown and enjoy the messiness of creation.
- Create a learning community with spaces for feedback, reflection, risk-taking, and engagement. Don't get emotional about mistakes.
- Change grantmaking practices. Adjust programmatic control and fund programs and projects the way grant partners see success.
- Adapt staffing models to reflect partnership roles. Be open to unintended outcomes.

### *From Phase 3: Don't Dabble; Fully Embrace the Discomfort of Change*

- Be confident in leading and the partnership role of design, modification, and implementation. Support and model collaborative problem solving. Pay for conveners, facilitators. Keep funding.
- Manage pressure from other funders to conform to status quo practices. Tension about such clarity of purpose becomes more real, particularly with other funders who prefer a hands-off approach, and from organizations that do not want to align with partnering groups. "Only by doing things differently from others, in a way that is linked tightly to what the foundation seeks to accomplish, can it achieve greater impact with the same grant dollars or enable its grantees to be more successful" (Porter & Kramer, 1999, p. 127).
- Commit to multiyear funding, and operating and planning support. Fund capacity building and leadership development.
- Evaluate to learn, not to generate an accountability mechanism. Traditional evaluation for the purpose of grant reporting is not practical in making real-time course corrections.

### *From Phase 4: Grow a Network Mindset*

- Seize funding and relationship opportunities. Share learning with other funders and model new ways of partnering. Weave connections and aggregate other funding. Stimulate readiness for next steps.
- Find joy in loose control and emerging leadership of partners. Honor the intangible benefits of honest and transparent relationships.
- Celebrate successes along the way. Measure, listen to stories, value qualitative changes. Acknowledge milestones.
- Plan continuation (and end) of the funding strategy. Funding designed for today's opportunities and challenges should pave the way for evolution.
- Recognize the funder is successful only if grantees achieve their goals.

## Conclusion

The journey in creating change has been well worth the time and resources invested. Ten years

ago, Brico was frustrated at lack of impact in its funding. Today, impact is clear. For funders committed to long-term strategy, willing to lean in closely with their grantees and to learn and change, this case study provides encouragement. Early funding, a commitment to partnership and transparent relationships, and tolerance for learning and mistakes is changing the philanthropic landscape in Wisconsin. For widespread change, funders must be more active in partnering to create real transformation for our futures. Today, Wisconsin Voices and the Brico Fund are network weavers: continually thinking about what is next, planning and creating a readiness to test new ideas, altering plans and programs, discarding ideas that don't work, and challenging their peer funders to lean in, too.

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