The Foundation Review

a publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Celebrating 15 Years of Knowledge Building for Transformation*

6-2024

Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success – With 2024 Prologue

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Recommended Citation

Wei-Skillern, J., & Silver, N. (2024). Four network principles for collaboration success – With 2024 prologue. *The Foundation Review, 16*(1). (Original work published 2013). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1691

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Cover Page Footnote

Editor's Note: This article, first published in print and online in 2013, has been republished by *The Foundation Review* with minor updates.

doi: 10.9707/1944-5660.1691

Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success – With 2024 Prologue

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Keywords: *Nonprofit strategy, foundation strategy, nonprofit networks, collaboration*

Prologue

Jane Wei-Skillern, Ph.D.

When I started to publish case studies and research on high-impact nonprofit networks in the early 2000s, the interest in my work was lukewarm at best. In the post-dot-com era, social entrepreneurship, nonprofit innovation, scale and capacity, branding, and performance measurement were all the rage. The dominant thinking in the field was that if we could just run social impact organizations more like fast-growth, private-sector businesses, then we could finally get to mission impact. As a young academic just starting out, I often doubted whether I was on the right track at all with my research focus on nonprofit networks.

At the same time, I was so inspired and compelled by the amazing stories of nonprofit networks, whose leaders were not focused on any of these issues, but instead, were leading with the grandest of ambitions, yet with utmost humility. These leaders were catalyzing networks of trusted allies, investing in relational rather than organizational infrastructure, and were delivering on their missions without trying to be the brightest stars, but by building constellations.

And so, what a wonderful surprise it was to learn that "Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success" has been among the most popular in the 15-year history of *The Foundation Review!* Our article distills the lessons from many cases of network leadership that I have had the privilege to study and document over the past two decades. Those four principles — focus on mission before organization; manage through trust, not control; promote others, not yourself; and build constellations, not stars — are not my ideas. Instead, they are based on the wisdom of countless network leaders who have tirelessly pioneered this way of working long before I ever came along to study it. They continue to lead through networks because they intuitively saw that working in community with trusted partners was truly the most efficient, effective way to get to scalable, sustainable impact. At the same time, unfortunately, this approach is often countercultural in the philanthropic and social-impact space, which so often puts a premium on organizational-level success, top-down performance metrics, brand recognition, and "star" organizations.

Over the past two decades, my goal in sharing these stories of nonprofit networks has been to champion these unsung heroes whose work has often been a struggle, and to make it possible for these networks, and so many others, to thrive. Thankfully, there is now more interest in this approach than ever. Unfortunately, the need has

Key Points

- This article identifies a set of four counter-intuitive principles that are critical to collaboration success and offers insights into how nonprofit leaders can ensure that their collaborations can have an impact that is dramatically greater than the sum of the individual parts.
- Based on a decade of research developing detailed case studies on a range of successful networks, the authors have identified a common pattern of factors that are essential to effective networking.
- The principles are to focus on mission before organization; manage through trust, not control; promote others, not yourself; and build constellations, not stars.

also never been greater and there is still much work to be done. And funders, as I noted in our Author Roundtable discussions, can make a tremendous difference here by modeling a different way leading — building up community and the individuals within that community at all levels, not just investing in those who hold formal leadership positions. When it comes to the reality on the ground, they're the experts. Provide them with leadership skills and training — and in a safe place, where the emphasis is on surfacing new ways of meeting community needs instead of meeting a funder's two-year performance standard.

My dream is that there will be a dramatic culture shift in the philanthropic and social-impact communities so that someday the ethos embodied by these four network principles will be the norm rather than the exception. Just as I have been inspired to share these examples of leadership, I aspire to lead in this way myself. If I can support your efforts to work in community with others to change the world, please do reach out. I would love to hear from you.

Introduction

Despite high hopes, hard work, and significant investment, the social sector has experienced countless partnerships that have failed to live up to expectations. How are some collaborations able to achieve spectacular results while others fail spectacularly? This article introduces four key operating principles that build a culture for collaboration success.

In developing these principles, we draw upon our own research and work with partnerships and networks. Jane Wei-Skillern (now on the faculty at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business and Stanford Graduate School of Business) began her career studying nonprofit growth and became very aware of the many challenges to organizational scale as the primary path to mission impact. At the same time, she identified several examples of nonprofits that had dramatically increased their mission impact through a strategy of cultivating external networks rather than organizational level growth. She has since focused on studying leading edge networks and published several articles and HBS case studies on the topic. Nora Silver is on the faculty of UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business and director of the Center for Nonprofit and Public Leadership. Before joining academia, she developed and supported a network of foundations and nonprofits to increase, strengthen, and diversify volunteerism for 13 years. Her research is on multisector leadership and nonprofit networks. The four principles emerged from our collective experience.

To illustrate the framework we use the case of the Energy Foundation, a $100 million foundation that is among the largest philanthropic funders advancing clean-energy policy, as a prime example of a foundation that has successfully catalyzed networks. Although a leading funder in the sector, EF may be the largest foundation that most people have never heard of. This is entirely by design. To advance its network, the foundation routinely acts to build the field of energy philanthropy, though not necessarily EF as an institution. And the Energy Foundation exemplifies those four principles.

A rich literature on applying networks in the nonprofit sector has emerged in recent years (Plastrik & Taylor, 2006; Monitor Institute & Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2011; Wei-Skillern & Marciano, 2008), with research on network structures (Grossman & Rangan, 2001; Huggett et al., 2010), systems (Kania & Kramer, 2011), and technological tools (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Scearce et al., 2010). The leadership skills and culture that are essential to successful network building, however, are often overlooked. We maintain that these skills are the critical factors that differentiate failed or mediocre collaborations from those that achieve transformational change. Yet, the leadership mindset and skills critical to the success of networks are the opposite of what is typically rewarded in the philanthropic sector. Since the skills for successful networking are

counterintuitive relative to common practice, they are worth highlighting here:

- Focus on mission before organization. Effective network leaders build strategies that advance the mission even when it does not result in direct benefits to their organization.
- Build partnerships based on trust, not control. Leaders depend upon shared values and trust rather than top-down controls and accountability systems.
- Promote others rather than yourself. Network leaders exhibit a strong norm of humility above all else, sharing credit and foregoing opportunities for individual advancement and institutional growth and brand building.
- Build constellations rather than lone stars. Leaders who catalyze successful networks acknowledge their weaknesses as readily as their strengths. The goal is to build the larger system that is necessary for delivering on the mission, not to become the "market leader."

Network leaders have succeeded often not because of, but despite, the contexts in which they operate. Nonprofit leaders — whether funders, board members, or nonprofit executives — tend to focus on their organizations as the primary vehicle for delivering their ambitious missions despite the reality that working with other external actors is fundamental to mission success. It is often assumed that controls and performance-accountability systems ensure quality impacts, when in fact shared values and trust among funders, nonprofits, and beneficiaries can actually lead to superior results. Nonprofit leaders are routinely lauded for increasing budgets, expanding programs, and building their institutions. Garnering recognition for organizational achievements and building organization brands are considered critical for fundraising success and, in turn, organizational sustainability. It should therefore be no surprise that humility is not the norm in the nonprofit sector. To harness the tremendous potential of networks, all nonprofit leaders must let go of conventional wisdom and shift their focus from organization level goals to network-level impacts. To show what this shift looks like in practical terms, we illustrate each of the four principles below using examples from the Energy Foundation case.

Garnering recognition for organizational achievements and building organization brands are considered critical for fundraising success and, in turn, organizational sustainability. It should therefore be no surprise that humility is not the norm in the nonprofit sector. To harness the tremendous potential of networks, all nonprofit leaders must let go of conventional wisdom and shift their focus from organization level goals to network-level impacts.

Principle 1: Strategy Is Determined by Mission Impact Before Organizational Growth

It is expected that nonprofit leaders grow their organizations in order to achieve significant social impact. Funders often seek short-term metrics to demonstrate the effectiveness of their grants. Boards, often populated with leaders from the corporate sector where growth is a key indicator of success, have a tendency to equate a nonprofit's growth with success. Nonprofit executives respond to the expectations and demands of their funders and boards, focusing on internal, organization-level activities such as program expansion, revenue growth, and organizational replication.

Yet, there are limits and challenges to growth. Organizational capacity is often stretched to launch a growth effort, and funding for sustaining growth once it has been achieved is notoriously difficult. Even if scale is achieved, managing multisite organizations is often a struggle to coordinate activities between headquarters and the field (Grossman & Rangan, 2001; Huggett et al., 2010), disseminate knowledge and innovation (Smith Milway & Saxton, 2011), and foster collaboration and coordination between affiliates (Kramer, 2009), among other challenges.

By contrast, networked nonprofits set at the center of their work their missions, instead of organizational gains or their short-term organizational objectives. They forsake organization-level benefits, sharing or relinquishing control over program implementation, access to funding, and recognition in order to focus on achieving leveraged impact rather than organizational scale.

The MacArthur, Pew, and Rockefeller foundations exemplified this mindset in 1991 when they jointly established the Energy Foundation with a mission to help solve America's energy problems. The three foundations collectively committed $100 million over 10 years to develop a new, independent philanthropic entity that would act as a strategic intermediary to achieve leveraged impact by supporting grantees that influence policy. This, in turn, would spur the growth of new clean-technology markets.

The founding donors set the stage to enable EF to embrace this network principle as well. Although each foundation committed different amounts to EF, all agreed to work as equals. Each appointed a single board member, but stipulated that the foundation be governed by a board comprised of the world's leading energy experts instead of large donors. By committing substantial, unrestricted, patient capital, they enabled the founding executives to be entrepreneurial and focus on letting the work of the foundation speak for itself (and to other potential donors) rather than get caught up in growing a large staff or building the institution. With a long-term commitment from its founding donors, EF kept a lean staff and began making grants right away. The founding donors' foresight enabled the foundation to help catalyze the growth of energy philanthropy such that billions of dollars have now been committed to clean energy industries worldwide, though EF's own annual budget has remained a relatively modest $100 million.

Rather than striving to build itself as an institution for its own sake, EF achieves leveraged impact because it advances its mission by building a network of powerful partners with other funders and grantees. The foundation aggregates philanthropic capital, works with the world's leading energy experts to synthesize strategies, and builds a portfolio of grants to advance clean-energy technology in the U.S. and China, the largest and fastest-growing energy markets in the world.

The results? Scientists and advocates funded by EF provided research, testimony, and other expertise that led California to adopt the nation's strictest fuel economy standards in 2004 — the first of many small victories of the EF network in advancing its mission. Thirteen other states soon followed California's lead and, in 2010, the Obama administration adopted clean car standards at the federal level. Since the adoption of federal fuel economy standards, innovation in the auto industry has exploded. In 1991 there were virtually no hybrid vehicles on American roads; now it is projected that there will be 55 hybrid models by 2015. By 2016, the U.S. vehicle fleet will reach an average of 35 miles per gallon, reducing global warming pollution by 400 million metric tons per year by 2030.

According to an independent evaluation, EF has been highly successful at advancing its goal of a sustainable energy future (Parzen, 1998). In the mid 1990s the foundation launched six regional campaigns to promote renewable portfolio standards that require minimum levels of renewable energy by power companies. In 15 of the 16 states that have adopted the renewable portfolio standards, 15 of the adoptions could be traced directly to EF campaigns (Kohler, 2007). By playing a role behind the scenes to weave together a

broad network of funders, grantees, and energy policy experts, EF was able to contribute to reaching these goals. Yet, rarely, if ever, was EF's role in these policies shared publicly, except when making the case for continued support to its own funders.

Successful network leaders often do the opposite of what conventional wisdom would suggest — forsaking organizational-level gains for mission impact. Although individual organization success contributes significant incremental impact on the ground, these organizations focus on the bigger picture and are aware that achieving mission impact requires vastly more than their own institutional growth. In the short term, this might mean a shift in focus from program expansion and replication to investing in peer networks to improve and broaden services. This can translate into expanding impact without necessarily bearing the burden of additional costs because the network as a whole is generating the value together and at greater efficiency (e.g., reduced duplication, leveraging expertise).

Principle 2: Build Partnerships Based on Trust, Not Control

Partner selection is of the utmost importance in successful networks. Selecting trustworthy partners lays the foundation upon which trust can be built. Many partnerships have failed because they have been forced from the top down, often by well-intentioned funders. Rather than identifying existing relationships in the field and investing to further support them, funders have tried to orchestrate new collaborations based on their own funding strategies. By ignoring the alignment of values and trust that is necessary among partners, funders often inadvertently sabotage their own efforts to promote collaboration. Consequently, partners often come to the table for the wrong reason — the promise of additional funding for their organization, rather than affinity toward their peers or desire to work collaboratively. These funder-driven relationships tend to focus on developing systems and processes for coordination rather than building the social capital that is essential to making the collaboration succeed over time.

Many partnerships have failed because they have been forced from the top down, often by well-intentioned funders. Rather than identifying existing relationships in the field and investing to further support them, funders have tried to orchestrate new collaborations based on their own funding strategies.

Networked nonprofits, in contrast, invest heavily in due diligence to select partners with whom they can work in the long term. They select a partner based not on how its credentials look on paper, but on its reputation for impact and its track record of commitment to working with others based on stated values. As the network develops, these shared values guide partners' decision-making and build in accountability to the shared goals. With these commonalities, participants are freed from trying to micromanage for every contingency and enjoy greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances and strategic imperatives. Ongoing investment in the relationships further engenders trust among network participants.

One grantee described pursuing an EF grant as a substantial undertaking, but one that enabled grantee organizations to develop their organizations. Unlike foundations that make one-year grants and churn their portfolios, EF provided multiyear grants that enabled grantees to develop institutional capacity. Grantees received not only financial support, but also participated in convenings with peer grantees and received tactical and strategic support from independent third-party coordinators paid for by EF. A majority of EF's grants are offered to organizations with which EF has had a previous relationship.

According to Eric Heitz, president of the Energy Foundation,

> We try not to do anything ourselves that someone else could do better. We get excited when we find grantees that think the same way, and we support them. We believe people who are closer to the challenges are often in a better position to make the strategic call.

Thus, EF sometimes makes grants to coalitions of nonprofits that are then able to regrant the funding according to how the local nonprofit leaders believe the resources can best be utilized across the coalition. This is the ultimate in unrestricted funding — allowing the grantee full flexibility to use the funds not only internally, but also through its peers. The networked approach employs a bottom-up way of solving a problem: relying on local and community experts, beneficiaries, and trusted partners to build joint solutions, and distributed systems to deliver the solution.

The founding business plan for EF reflected input from more than 100 interviews with the world's leading energy experts across all sectors. Extensive peer reviews continue to shape EF's program sectors and strategies. Energy Foundation staff regularly host workshops on different issues, bringing together experts from across the spectrum. Their third-party coordinators working in the field often bring back information about potential gaps and additional funding needs. Foundation staff is reminded to "never pretend to be the smartest in the room," but rather to regularly seek out experts who can raise questions and critique EF's strategy so that it can adapt to the field. The foundation deliberately does not publish its funding strategy in detail because it does not want to miss potential innovations from current and future grantees by defining it too explicitly.

High-impact networks are comprised of organizations that see the work of others in their network as integral to their ability to achieve impact. There is no hierarchy as to the value of various resources or skills that are brought to bear on the problem. For example, despite bringing the majority of the financial capital to the table, EF readily acknowledges that strategic insights into how to deploy funds can be gained from grantees, board members, and other experts in the network. This dynamic enables less restricted and more frequent communication and greater learning and coordination across network participants. Indeed, mutual accountability among peers is often found to be a more powerful lever for ensuring high performance than top-down approaches, across a range of contexts (Hiller et al., 2006; Sarason, 1990; Torre & Voyce, 2007). Trust-based relationships among network partners allow more holistic, coordinated, timely, and realistic solutions to rise to the surface. This approach requires a fundamental rethinking of prevailing managerial approaches, in which hierarchy and top-down controls are the norm.

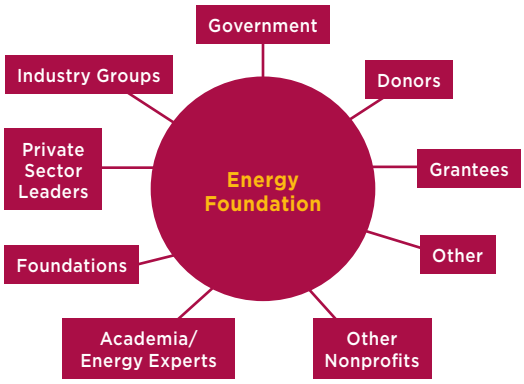
Principle 3: Promote Others Rather Than Yourself

Humility is a hallmark of successful network catalysts. Networked nonprofits recognize the enormity of the problems that they seek to address, and are aware that it is folly to go it alone. By acknowledging one's own limitations, leaders focus less on developing their own competitive advantages and become more open to learning and engaging with others in the field. Networked nonprofits understand that when it comes to recognition, giving can be more powerful than receiving. Sharing or even eschewing recognition for contributions to the network builds a reservoir of goodwill that motivates all participants to fully invest and lend their ongoing support to the network. This dynamic requires a dramatic mindset shift from one in which leaders try to exert maximum control over strategy and programs and focus on gaining recognition for themselves and their organizations. Highlighting the contributions of one's peers engenders high performance throughout the network.

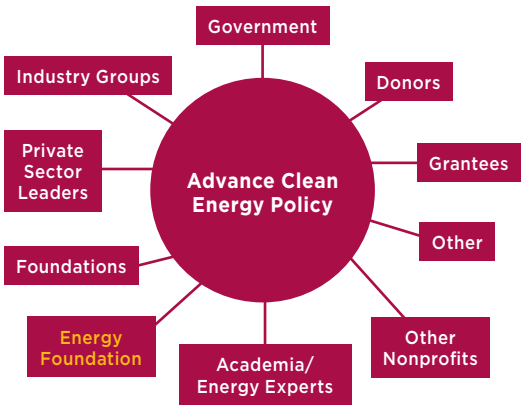
The Energy Foundation deliberately plays a behind the scenes role, supporting groups that play a more public role. While its grantees routinely appear in the press and in public forums, EF does not see that as its role or as how it can add the most value. Thus, EF actively seeks to

FIGURE 1 Build Constellations, Not Stars

Stars: Traditional organizational level approach



Constellations: Build network with mission at the center, no dominant institutional or programmatic approach



NOTE: Concept attributed to Marty Kooistra.

give credit to grantees, instead of trying to take the credit for itself.

This approach has served EF particularly well in its China Sustainable Energy Program, whose goal is to support the country's efforts to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy. CSEP, whose staff are indigenous Chinese, utilizes a service-oriented model, offering assistance to Chinese agencies, experts, and entrepreneurs to address energy challenges. The program links Chinese experts with best-practices expertise from around the world. As China emerges as one of the world's sustainable energy leaders, CSEP is beginning to share best practices from China with the rest of the world. The Energy Foundation's approach with CSEP is to elevate local champions and to play a support role wherever possible; its president has quipped that the foundation is "servant to many, master to none." He describes the EF approach as based on the thought of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tse: "The leader is best when people barely know we exist. When the work is done, people will think they did it themselves."

To get work done effectively through a network, participants routinely strive to help others do their best and make others look good. Networked organizations see the work of others as integral to their own ability to achieve mission impact. As a result, they look to the strengths of their partners and seek to support and empower them. The synergies among partners' respective skills, knowledge, and resources, in turn, generate superior results.

Principle 4: Build Constellations, Not Stars

Networked organizations do not strive to be the brightest star, but rather to build the constellation that will enable achievement of the shared vision. They see themselves as nodes within an array of equal, interconnected partners, rather than as the center of their universes. The goal is not to become the leaders in their fields first and then engage in collaboration to further establish dominance. Instead, the goal is to mobilize the various organizations and resources that together can deliver more impact. Resources of all types — leadership, money, talent — can have dramatically more impact when leveraged across organizations, fields, and sectors. Not only does this approach save each organization from trying to do everything on its own, it promotes a dynamic in which resources are allocated where they can make the most impact. If another organization is better able address an issue, then it makes sense to invest in that effort rather than to reinvent the wheel in one's own organization. This is the approach the EF takes. (See Figure 1.)

Alongside the results that EF has seeded on the ground, it has played an instrumental role in developing the broader energy philanthropy field. Although EF has no endowment and must fundraise annually for its own operations, it routinely suggests that donors give directly to others in the field if it is not able to add the most value. Furthermore, EF often invests its own resources in field building with no expectation of a direct benefit. For example, EF has lent its executive staff for months at a time to peer organizations to develop capacity for working through networks among their counterparts globally. EF executives will often give presentations to educate other donors to give to the energy philanthropy field, even if funding for EF is not forthcoming. The foundation's goal is to grow the market, rather than to become the market leader. Success is measured by reductions in tons of carbon dioxide emissions and not by EF's own institutional success. Other networked nonprofits share this approach to orchestrate the array of actors that together can deliver a more effective, more efficient, and more sustainable impact.

The Energy Foundation's strategy illustrates the shift from building a great institution to making its role less necessary. While the EF case illustrates the four network principles, other successful networks that we have studied in microfinance, international development, environmental conservation, and human services exhibit these principles as well. Indeed, these principles were derived from identifying patterns of strategy and leadership across a portfolio of network cases and contexts.

But it should be kept in mind that even with these similarities, every network is unique and emerges from its particular context and circumstances. Thus, we offer the essential principles that form the DNA of a successful network culture. The Energy Foundation was able to flourish as a network in part because it was explicitly created by its founding donors as a network; the MacArthur, Pew, and Rockefeller foundations offered significant patient capital and the support of an expert board (rather than a donor board) to building the network and the energy philanthropy field more broadly. As a newly established institution in an emerging field, EF did not have to fight the turf battles that are more common in established fields.

The mandate has never been to build EF as an institution, but rather to promote the global transition to a sustainable-energy future. With the support of its founding donors, EF had the flexibility to experiment and innovate. From the beginning, it was clear that the only way to achieve its goal was to achieve significant leverage on its own limited resources. Mobilizing a network of institutions in which EF was just one of many important actors seemed to be the only logical path to success.

While each network may emerge out of idiosyncratic circumstances, they share a relentless focus on the vision and mission as the primary driver and motivator of action. In the long term, nonprofit leaders should strive to make themselves less relevant — even go out of business — because they have achieved their mission or built capacity into the system to deliver the mission sustainably. Heitz even tells his staff that their job is to "lose": Once they have supported initiatives or organizations to succeed, their job is to let them go and apply EF's resources to the next big challenge. While few organizations are close enough to meeting their missions that they are actually at risk of putting themselves out of business, nonprofit leaders should aspire to nothing less.

Network Opportunities for Funders

The urgency and scale of the problems facing society today, coupled with the limited results to date, argue for a new approach. (See Table 1.) Networks hold the potential for meeting the challenge. To ensure collaboration success, leaders at all levels must go in with a fundamentally different mindset, letting go of conventional wisdom and shifting their focus from organization-level gains to mission and field-level impact. Leaders must find trusted partners with whom they are willing to invest while sharing control and recognition. The norm of humility must replace self promotion. The quest for the

TABLE 1 Network Mindset Shift

From	To
Focus on growth	Focus on the mission
Focus on control	Focus on trust
Focus on yourself	Focus on others
Forcus on garnering resources	Focus on sharing resources
Focus on the particular	Focus on the whole

organizational success must be relinquished for the real potential of solving problems.

While there are funders that encourage collaboration among their grantees, the number that live and breathe these principles in practice is rather small. If funders expect to see more collaborative behavior in the field, a good place to start is with themselves. It is often said that he who pays the piper calls the tune. Armed with these principles, funders are in the unique position to "be the change that they want to see in the world."

To begin on this path, funders might consider:

- Selecting grantees that embody the leadership capabilities to work through networks with a track record of working through networks. Invest in these leaders and their existing networks rather than trying to create new networks among grantees that might not have the inclination or ability to collaborate.

- Providing unrestricted, long-term support to enable grantees to experiment with and develop networks that have the greatest impact. If sufficient due diligence is done in selecting network leaders, it is likely that fruitful networks will emerge. Funders are infusing additional support into networks that developed organically: They are going with the flow rather than trying to redirect the river.

- Rethinking performance metrics, shifting from organizational-level to network-level impacts, allowing grantees and beneficiaries themselves to help identify performance metrics and develop accountability systems, and at the same time remaining realistic about the timelines required for achieving network-level impacts. Often, performance-measurement systems are developed from the funder's interests and needs when, in fact, much of the expertise for understanding performance is dispersed throughout the network. Tapping into this resource can enable dramatic improvements in measurement systems.

- Working in networks themselves for greater impact, with networks of other funders or even across sectors. For funders, walking the talk is powerful at multiple levels, not the least of which includes aggregating capital, sharing expertise, leveraging resources, and strengthening the norms and culture for working through networks among grantees. The virtually untapped potential of networks in the philanthropic sector paints a hopeful picture of what the sector has the power to achieve.

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Editor's Note:

This article, first published in print and online in 2013, has been republished by *The Foundation Review* with minor updates.

Recommended Citation:

Wei-Skillern, J., & Silver, N. (2024). Four network principles for collaboration success – With 2024 prologue. *The Foundation Review, 16*(1). (Original work published 2013). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1691