

# **Cascadia Center for Leadership**

**Report on 20 years of nurturing rural leadership**



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# Cascadia Leadership REPORT

Produced by Humboldt Area Foundation

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Amy Jester, Heidi Terbrack and 116 graduates and organizational leaders

## Introduction

For 20 years, the Cascadia Center for Leadership's annual 10-day Leadership Development Program has been fertile ground for nearly 550 rural organizational leaders from the private sector, nonprofits, government and education to evolve leadership practices. The program provides tools, peer mentorship, and coaching that shift mindsets and grow relationships to empower regional leaders to make decisions and collaborate in service to the future vitality of the region. These tools and practices have pushed participants to expand their understanding of what it means to lead, to grow, how teams collaborate and think critically together, and to harness differences in skills, perspectives and communication styles. Program success is measured by participant engagement and their ability to grow skills and use tools in the following areas:

- Listening
- Difficult Conversations
- Giving Feedback
- Mindfulness
- Honoring Differences
- Commitment to and Practice of a Leadership Philosophy
- Decision Making
- Leading Teams
- Designing and Leading Meetings
- Leading Organizational Change

In 2019 and early 2020, an assessment was done to learn about impacts of the program over time. The assessment process was facilitated by Humboldt Area Foundation staff Amy Jester and Heidi Terbrack, Cascadia Directors Mary Gelinas and Roger James, and Brooks Estes of the Environment & Community Program at Humboldt State University. 116 people, both graduates and organizational leaders that sent their teams through the program, engaged in the assessment through a graduate survey, interviews and focus groups. Additionally, the assessment team reviewed evaluations submitted by graduates on their final day in the program. The assessment examined:

- Experiences in the program - what was successful and how it could be strengthened
- Continued use of program tools and practices at the individual and organizational levels
- Opportunities for Cascadia graduate network engagement
- Current organizational leadership challenges
- Additional leadership supports needed by graduates and organizations

Assessment results are intended to inform Humboldt Area Foundation's future organizational leadership development strategies, as well as those of other institutions. Additionally, the assessment aims to assist organizational leaders in thinking critically about staff development opportunities.



Cascadia graduates, 2018

## I. Key Themes

The assessment provided important data on program impact, ideas to grow and evolve local leadership development opportunities, and common organizational challenges. The following are key themes and insights discovered during the assessment process.

### Themes on the Cascadia Leadership Program

- The program has been a valued resource by many local organizations, with a proven track record of growing leadership capacity
- Cascadia strengthens graduate confidence and increases their opportunities to lead
- Graduates continue to use what they learned on a daily and weekly basis for years after they have completed the program
- Practice is important; folks want more of it and real world application
- Participants value the opportunity to work with local faculty that are practitioners of what they teach
- The act of going through the program as part of a cohort significantly enhanced growth, learning and vulnerability

### Themes on Organizational Leadership

- People are hungry for formal leadership development opportunities, and often need them to see themselves as leaders
- Organizations consistently struggle with culture, conflict, change, difference, internal collaboration, and constituent engagement, which costs organizations greatly
- The use of multiple leadership models within an organization can create tension and incongruence; there's value in an organization investing in a model, then developing staff at different levels within that model
- People want to be part of and contribute to a leadership development network
- There is great demand for a local management training program



## II. Experiences in the Program

### Successes

The annual 10-day Cascadia Leadership Program has been an important local resource for organizations invested in growing the efficacy of their leaders. Interviewees shared that they continue to send their team members to Cascadia because it poises them to step into higher levels of leadership, and that graduates are more motivated and confident after going through the program. One interviewee expressed, “They come back on fire – with wider vision; we’re blessed even more.”



***“The program made me feel more confident as a leader and allowed me to work on the skills that aren’t my natural strengths.”***

Graduate Natalie Arroyo

Organizations have seen their Cascadia graduates use the tools they learn to further develop and influence organizational culture, particularly around communication, how to organize people to get work done, and self evaluation. Additionally, they report that graduates have the confidence and tools to challenge and manage up, communicate well, navigate power dynamics and understand their own power, recommend solutions, and lead a team during times of change. Those participating in the assessment also commented on how the program helped graduates grow skills in communication to support their teams and advance their work, including team building, unifying under the mission, clarifying and committing to vision and growing a sense of collective responsibility.

Nearly 80% of survey respondents noted that the program was more or much more effective than other leadership development programs they’d been through. One interviewee shared, “It’s a formative experience in one’s professional life.” Another interviewee expressed, “Cascadia is a gift; I haven’t seen a program like this in any jurisdiction I’ve worked in.”

Many graduates reported that they had a deeper understanding of themselves as a result of participating in the program. Closing session evaluations regularly reflected that Cascadia helped people see themselves as leaders, opened them to new ways of understanding leadership, and supported them in showing up more powerfully in their leadership roles. One graduate shared, “I have a renewed commitment to and reawakening of what leadership really is.” Another expressed, “Cascadia blew my mind! I learned so much about myself, about affecting change and about community.”

Cascadia graduates report continuing to use what they learned on a daily and weekly basis, even years after they have completed the program. The most regularly used practices include:

- Facilitating effective meetings
- Listening skills
- Giving feedback and difficult communication
- Practicing mindfulness
- Honoring differences
- Implementing their own leadership philosophy
- Leading teams
- Decision making

The cohort model has been consistently valued by program participants. 78% of survey respondents indicated it enhanced their learning by a considerable or great extent. In exit evaluations, graduates have regularly identified their cohort experience as being one of the most useful parts of the program, with an emphasis on the value of deeply learning together, having a confidential environment to share different perspectives and lived experiences, and networking or relationship building. As one graduate shared, “Cascadia did more than just develop my perspective on leadership. It provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to experience other leaders’ perspectives, approaches and growth. The Cascadia Program’s brilliance rests with its ability to coalesce leaders from a diverse array of professional and community settings.”

Graduates that went through the program as a team found the experience to be particularly impactful. As one participant expressed, “It really changed how we related to one another, how we have meetings, and how we communicate and understand each other. People get to know each other at a deeper level.”

Review of exit evaluations highlighted a few key aspects of program structure that made the experience particularly useful, including:

- A high level of interactive engagement
- Regular opportunities to work in small groups
- Exercises that allowed participants to practice program tools, and provide each other with feedback
- Homework that deepened understanding of tools and concepts (including through application on real organizational issues), and requiring deep personal reflection and evolution

Survey respondents indicated a number of faculty strengths that added to the program’s success, with over 80% of participants indicating humor, deep knowledge of and a passion for the subject matter, approachability, and communication skills. A key element to this success is having faculty that are local practitioners in the work, which has allowed them to teach, coach and evolve the program to meet local needs based on their lived experience of working with local organizations and networks.

## Opportunities to Strengthen the Program

Assessment participants shared feedback and ideas on how to strengthen the impact of the Cascadia Leadership Program. The most frequent recommendation was to have more practice or applied learning opportunities, both during and after graduation from the program. People wanted to be able to experiment with the tools they’re using within their organizations and to get help in doing so. Participants recommended preparing graduates for sharing tools and concepts with their teams in ways that would result in greater organizational adoption.

A key theme we heard during the assessment was the need for local opportunities for graduates to advance their skills once they’ve been through the program. We also heard that in many organizations, leaders at different levels of hierarchy or in different departments get trained in varying leadership models, which contributes to Cascadia graduates having a harder time growing widespread organizational adoption of Cascadia tools and practices, thereby limiting the potential impact of their experience in the program and creating tensions and incongruence in how the organization operates.



*“(Cascadia) provided me with an unparalleled opportunity to experience other leaders’ perspectives, approaches and growth.”*

Graduate Mark Weller





Many participants identified a desire for connecting with peers from other Cascadia graduate cohorts and having a better understanding of the skills and expertise of those in the graduate network. It was noted several times that there would be value in cultivating the graduate network in a way that participants would develop competency in peer coaching and potentially be able to support each other in trying different approaches to addressing organizational and community challenges. Participants also expressed interest in resource sharing among graduates, so that the network could have access to examples, scenarios, templates and information that others have successfully used in their organizations.

### **III. Organizational Challenges and Additional Leadership Development Opportunities**

Throughout the assessment, we asked participants to share about challenges they were experiencing as leaders, as well as observations and ideas about opportunities to further strengthen and advance leadership practices within their organizations.

#### **Challenges**

Participants expressed that some of their greatest challenges included difficult conversations, addressing conflict, teamwork, and personality differences. This was followed by organizational change, then the stressors of leading from within, followed by difficulty or lack of partnership with upper management. More specific regularly mentioned concerns, stressors and pain points included:

- How to spark and lead organizational change and critical evolution or re-tooling, as well as being agile and adaptable
- Managing different personality types, egos, power dynamics, conflict, toxicity, burnout, lack of transparency, accountability, difficult communication, and fear
- Shifting or creating a cohesive organizational culture
- Bridging between the high level executive team and management
- Diversity, equity and inclusion

Participants also noted the need to grow skills in shifting how they lead externally. During times of change, leaders spoke to the need for strengthening how organizations evaluate and manage the process of changing relationships with customers or stakeholders, partners, and the region as a whole. Several leaders noted challenges of collaboration and community engagement on big hairy issues that take many years to address. Those that expressed such challenges shared that it would be helpful to have more tools for creative process design and facilitation, as well as people that could be called on outside their organizations to think through strategy, design, and to possibly assist with facilitation.

It is clear that the challenges and leadership development opportunities noted here cost organizations significantly in time, emotional labor, creativity, and attention to client, customer and community needs.



## Leadership Development Opportunities

The assessment yielded important feedback and insights on additional supports and resources needed to strengthen local leadership practices. The majority of participant needs and ideas fell into three major categories: organizational development, negotiating power dynamics, and management training, as follows:



***"I have a renewed commitment to and a reawakening of what leadership really is."***  
Graduate Carla Rae Creason

### Organizational Development

- Understanding the need for shifting organizational culture
- Further development on how to lead organizational change, including more rapid pivots
- Intentional structure for mentoring to help prepare people for upward mobility
  - Best practices to support direct reports in skill & knowledge building (knowledge transfer)
  - Cultivating effective teams
  - Working through and supporting self and team through overwhelm, burnout and fear
- Growing coaching and mediation skills
  - How to hold and mediate difficult conversations
  - Moving/empowering people from personal to broad goal sharing
  - Advancing participatory decision making
  - Engagement around responsibility and accountability



Julie Fulkerson, co-founder of Cascadia

### How to Negotiate Power Dynamics

- Handling egos or overpowering characteristics
- Effectively managing up or dealing with upper management challenges
- Bridging between high level executive team and management
- Handling a lack of transparency
- Developing mindful leadership practices





**First Cascadia cohort**

## **Management Training**

- Supervision
  - How to deal with conflict as a supervisor
  - Supporting staff in their upward mobility
  - Evaluations
  - Recruiting for increasingly diverse and complex teams
  - Developing regular feedback and coaching practices
- Managing through change and difficult times
  - How to work across teams and levels within an organization, including how to address issues early on, especially when there are differences in rank and power
  - Negotiating skills
  - How to deal with painful or negative narratives about the organization, including how to create dialogue and trust within and across teams when really hard nonnegotiable directives are instituted at the executive level
- Project management
- Financial leadership

Discussed to a lesser degree, but with some frequency, included an interest in growing leadership practices informed by and committed to racial equity and gender diversity, as well as better understanding strategic options for decision making and approaching problems with new ways of thinking.



## IV. Looking Forward

Data for this assessment was collected prior to the pandemic and all our world has experienced in the last year. As we continue to lead through crisis, recurring and recovering from disasters, economic downturns, and demands to greatly change how our institutions operate, there is opportunity to build on the success Cascadia has had with helping grow leaders' abilities to mindfully lead teams, make healthy decisions, and communicate with deliberate intention. This is an important time in our region to evolve organizational leadership development programs and supports. It could be incredibly powerful to pair Cascadia's strengths with opportunities for leaders to grow skills in adaptability, addressing structural racism, leading change, organizational development, transforming business models, deepening partnerships, and harnessing tension and conflict.

## V. Gratitude and Appreciation

The Cascadia Center for Leadership was evoked in 2000 by Julie Fulkerson, Kathy Moxon, and research support from Lynn Evans, rooted in the idea that a coordinated effort that is locally grounded, dedicated to regional leadership and policy development, and accompanied by community based planning and implementation, can improve the conditions for economic, social and environmental prosperity on California's North Coast. We are grateful for the courage, creativity, and visionary leadership of these women, who saw that the conditions were ripe for tapping into the power of this place through how we invest in, cultivate, and connect people working to make this place thrive so that they could live more fully into their potential as leaders. In reflecting on how the term 'cascadia' embodied the intention of what the Center was created to do, Julie shared that, "North Coasters live on the edge, literally and figuratively. A cascade is about building energy and force and movement drip by drip. It seemed like a subtle way to build leadership strength without designating any single person(s) or group(s). It has no limit, no barriers, no end."

For the last 20 years, Mary Gelinas, Ed.D. and Roger James, Ed.D. have co-directed and been lead faculty of the Cascadia Leadership Program, evolving it over time to incorporate changes in the field, adapting to the needs of participants, and seizing opportunities in the region to shift leadership practices. Mary and Roger have been joined by core faculty members Heather Equinoss and Robert Maurer, Ph.D.

We are deeply thankful to Julie, Kathy, Mary, Roger, Heather, and Bob for their commitment to nurturing leaders across the community over the last 20 years.

### **Cascade:**

- **A waterfall or a series of small waterfalls over steep rocks.**
- **A succession of stages, processes, operations, or units.**
- **A series of components or networks, the output of each of which serves as the input for the next.**
- **A process that occurs in successive stages, each of which is dependent on the preceding one, and often producing a cumulative effect.**