Building the Capacity of Networks to Achieve Systems Change

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Although social networks have been studied for decades, the topic has recently gained increased attention, largely because of the explosion in virtual networking spawned by social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Scearce, Kasper, & Grant, 2010). In addition to providing obvious benefits to individuals (e.g., social support, staying informed), networks play a vital role in improving the well-being of communities, regions, countries, and entire societies. Networks helped deliver many advances that we now take for granted, including the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the dismantling of policies and practices that overtly excluded specific groups of people, and shifts in laws and social norms relating to tobacco use and alcohol consumption (McAdam, 1986; Diani & McAdam, 2003). Given the plethora of social and economic ills that continue to plague the world, it is well worth considering the role that networks can play in bringing about fundamental change, as well as the role that foundations might play in strengthening and supporting these networks.

A network is a set of relationships among a group of "members" – individuals or organizations. Members use those relationships to achieve their individual and collective goals. Some networks are organized according to a formal structure, with dues-paying members and professional staff. Other networks are informal, fluid, or ad hoc. Regardless of form, the defining feature of a network

Key Points

· Networks have historically played an essential role in promoting progress in areas such as social justice, political reform, environmental protection, and public health.

· Foundations are increasingly recognizing the power of networks and looking for strategies to help networks achieve their potential.

· The most common strategies are: a) convene a new network around a mission in line with the foundation's interests, or b) make grants to an existing network whose interests align with the foundation's. Each strategy has practical limitations.

· This paper analyzes an alternative strategy developed by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation (MRBF). In addition to providing networks with grants, the foundation's staff (referred to as "network officers") interact frequently with funded networks, providing resources, offering analyses, raising challenging questions, and encouraging strategic action. Network officers also broker relationships among people and organizations that might benefit from working together in a networked way.

· The MRBF approach constitutes a "model" for building the capacity of change-oriented networks, but is recommended only for foundations that are highly patient, adaptive, and skilled in working with grantees in a give-and-take fashion.

is that members interact with one another in ways that confer mutual benefit.

Networks are crucial to any effort to change policies, structures, and systems (Katcher, 2010; Kania & Kramer, 2011). A network allows a broad range of people and organizations to identify their shared interests, to deepen their understanding of the systems they are seeking to change, and to find a shared framework from which to act. Members of a network are unlikely to agree on each and every philosophical point, but they can use their relationships and sense of shared purpose to coordinate actions capable of producing social change.

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Networks essentially take on the "larger" work that is beyond the reach of individual nonprofit organizations (Masters & Osborn, 2010). For good reason, nonprofits typically focus on a specific group of clients (e.g., preschool children from low-income households, seniors living alone) or a particular area of impact (e.g., revitalizing a downtown district, protecting a local watershed). By bringing together multiple nonprofits with compatible interests and complementary resources, a network allows for a much wider scope of influence.

Wei-Skillern and Marciano (2008) make the case that networks not only promote progress on large societal goals, but also pay off for the nonprofits involved:

Networked nonprofits forge long-term partnerships with trusted peers to tackle their missions on multiple fronts. … By mobilizing resources outside their im-

mediate control, networked nonprofits achieve their missions far more efficiently, effectively, and sustainably than they could have by working alone. (p. 40)

Although networks have the potential to achieve fundamental changes in social, political, and economic systems, few networks actually aspire to play this activist role. Most networks are simply conduits for communication, referrals, collective learning, and mutual support. Even when a network strives for collective impact, a variety of structural and practical issues work against the network's effectiveness (Katcher, 2010). While a traditional organization can direct members (e.g., employees, board members) to carry out specific actions, a network operates on the principles of voluntary engagement, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997). Members of a network affiliate voluntarily and stay only as long as their individual interests are being met. Moreover, many networks don't have a paid coordinator to keep the work moving forward. Networks are also hampered by the episodic manner in which members come together and communicate with one another. Coordination also suffers from the fact that member organizations often have only one person directly involved in the network. If that person leaves the organization, the network may lose that organization's resources and influence.

What Role for Foundations?

This litany of challenges calls into question the actual ability of networks to achieve the sorts of systems change that in theory they seem capable of producing. At the same time, the analysis also suggests an obvious and important role for foundations in helping networks to realize their potential. Masters and Osborn (2010) urge foundations to bring potential allies together, support staff and communications, and "provide other resources dedicated to building and maintaining networks" (p. 21).

This advice is reiterated by Kania and Kramer (2011) in their article on "collective impact":

We recommend that funders who want to create large-scale systems change follow four practices: Take responsibility for assembling the elements of a solution;

create a movement for change; include solutions from outside the nonprofit sector; and use actionable knowledge to influence behavior and improve performance. (p. 41)

Comprehensive Community Initiatives

In many ways, these recommendations take us back to the strategy of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), which a number of proactive foundations began introducing in the early 1990s (Brown & Garg, 1997; Auspos, Brown, Kubisch, & Sutton, 2009; Trent & Chavis, 2009). [1] In a typical CCI, the foundation convenes a community coalition to focus on a particular issue that the foundation has identified as important.[2] CCI funders usually allow the coalition to reach its own decisions and to establish its own action plan. Nonetheless, the funder almost always plays a defining role – by setting the overarching mission and by influencing many of the conditions that govern how the coalition operates.

In theory, CCIs are ideal vehicles for collective impact. In practice, many of the coalitions spawned by CCIs have had limited success in achieving discernible systems change, and in some cases have left the funded community with decreased capacity (Brown & Fiester, 2007). In a comprehensive review of CCIs, Kubisch et al. (2011) conclude that these initiatives "require new implementation processes and structures that can distort local energy, provoke resistance, and disrupt existing relationships among local players and programs" (p. 140). The historical record on foundation-convened coalitions suggests that only a fraction have established themselves as effective long-term agents of change. As a result,

CCIs have fallen somewhat out of favor within the philanthropic sector, even among some of the foundations that pioneered this approach to systems change.

Other Approaches for Funders

CCIs are not the only way that foundations can take advantage of the power of networks. An obvious alternative is to provide financial and other support to networks that have goals in line with the foundation's interests. The Packard Foundation commissioned an assessment that looks specifically at what foundations might do to assist networks (Monitor Institute & Packard Foundation, 2009). The 74 network representatives who participated in the survey reported that their networks needed strengthening in the following ways:

- funding for staffing;
- funding to facilitate networking and communication (e.g., technology, meetings);
- expanding and diversifying membership;
- making decisions effectively, efficiently, and transparently;
- balancing the focus on the big picture versus day-to-day operations; and
- developing leaders, especially new leaders.

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[1] CCIs have been developed to address issues such as child well-being, violence, substance abuse, and poverty by foundations such as Annie E. Casey (White & Wehlage, 1995; AECF, 1995); Kellogg (Foster-Fishman & Long, 2009), Robert Wood Johnson (Hallfors, Cho, Livert, & Kadushin, 2002; Walker, Gibbons & Navarro, 2009; Silver & Weitzman, 2009), The Colorado Trust (Easterling, Gallagher, & Lodwick, 2003; Conner & Easterling, 2009); California Wellness (Cheadle, et al, 2005), and Sierra Heath Foundation (Meehan, Hebbeler, Cherner, & Peterson, 2009).

[2] A coalition is a specific form of network, in which a specific group of actors unite in a defined structure to achieve an agreed-upon agenda (usually involving changes in service, policies, institutions, systems, or social norms).

As foundations get into the business of supporting social-change networks, it is important to recognize that this line of work requires strategies that go beyond what works in the case of individual nonprofit organizations (Scearce, 2011). Networks require not only operating grants, but also organizational capacity building, especially in the areas of staffing and strategy development. Capacity-building approaches that have proven effective with stand-alone organizations won't necessarily attain the same success with networks because the organizational structure, management tasks, and processes for developing and executing strategy are very different for networks than for traditional nonprofit organizations (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997).

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The Approach of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

This article describes the network-building strategy of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation (MRBF), a regional foundation based in Winston-Salem, N.C. The Babcock Foundation has a long tradition of working for systems change and a widespread reputation as an innovative grantmaker. The next section presents the foundation's overall strategy in working with networks, followed by a description of the role that "network officers" play in carrying out this strategy. The article then assesses whether this strategy adds value for networks and discusses a range of complications that the strategy introduces, especially with regard to the grantmaker-grantee relationship. These descriptions and analyses are based on information gathered through a series of facilitated learning sessions with MRBF staff, as well as through interviews with MRBF board members, grantees, and peer foundations.

MRBF's Strategy for Networks

The Babcock Foundation funds groups throughout the southeastern United States that advance the foundation's mission of "moving people and places out of poverty." The staff and board at the foundation adopt a systems-level perspective in analyzing and addressing the historical and structural causes of poverty, including racism, privilege, and oppression. Recognizing that progress requires fundamental shifts in systems, policy, and culture, MRBF has long recognized that it needs to work not only with strong grassroots organizations, but with broad networks of organizations interested in social and economic change.

Types of Networks Supported by MRBF

Whereas many foundations interested in social change have convened new networks around the foundation's agenda, MRBF seeks to strengthen the networks that change-oriented organizations have formed on their own accord. Some of these networks are formal associations of organizations with a particular line of work (e.g., community development corporations), while others are informal in their structure and fluid in their membership. The key for MRBF is that the network's members need to share an interest in promoting some form of social, political, or economic change.

While the Babcock Foundation is motivated by a desire to change systems, the networks supported by the foundation do not always begin with an action-oriented agenda. In many cases the network came together initially as a means for organizations to learn from one another. MRBF is less interested in the network's origins than in its potential for collective impact.

One of the more interesting networks supported by MRBF is a loosely affiliated group of organizations and individuals in Alabama working on state tax and constitutional reform. This network began to take shape in the early 2000s when a number of MRBF-funded organizations began having conversations about the larger issues that impede progress. These groups were working on issues such as civil rights, racism, tax policy, transportation policy, child-care, education, housing, and economic development. In talking to one another, they recognized that their ability to effect change was constrained by Alabama's unique policy environment. Namely, the state constitution ensures that virtually all public policy is enacted at the state level; local jurisdictions have no authority to raise taxes or to control development through zoning. Building on this analysis, a network was formed around the goal of reforming the state constitution. Over the past few years the network has conducted policy analysis, awareness-raising, and public education to promote either a constitutional convention or legislative action to rewrite key articles of the constitution. The network has also advocated for more limited policy changes, such as increasing the income threshold for the state income tax. The Babcock Foundation has played a crucial role in building the network, helping the network define its strategy, and funding key activities.

MRBF's Intent in Supporting Networks

The Babcock Foundation has a very specific view of what it means to strengthen these networks. Based on 15 years of experience working with many different types of networks throughout the Southeast, the staff and board have come to believe that networks need to successfully navigate the following tasks:

- Develop a shared purpose;
- Remain focused on that purpose;
- Identify and respond to the core issues that matter most to network members;
- Develop a purposeful, practical strategy that is able to produce tangible impacts and adapt that strategy to changing circumstances;
- Gain credibility among the organizations and institutions that are crucial to the network's success;

- Connect to diverse resources including local, regional, and national funders; businesses; and the public sector; and
- Diversify the network's membership to include partners that will enhance its effectiveness, especially new members who bring different perspectives and have different constituencies and spheres of influence.

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The foundation makes grants to help networks strengthen themselves in these ways. But MRBF also takes a hands-on approach with networks that involves foundation staff interacting directly, and in some cases intensely, with network members to set strategic direction and acquire the needed resources. Foundation staff ask probing questions, but refrain from telling the network what goals it should adopt and what strategies it should implement. This reflects the foundation's core belief that "power should be maintained within the community." [3]

The Network Officer

The MRBF approach to building the capacity of networks is complex, nuanced, and fraught with risk. Success hinges on the effectiveness of the "network officer" – a program officer or manager who has specific responsibility for supporting and strengthening networks. Rather than simply providing a network with a grant and monitoring the network's progress, the network officer works directly and actively with members of

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[3] This belief has both an ethical and a practical basis. From an ethical perspective, the Babcock Foundation regards it as unjust to impose its will on others, especially because of the power and advantage that naturally accrue to foundations. From a practical standpoint, MRBF has come to recognize that grantees are ultimately more effective in achieving social change when they act upon their own values and knowledge. Encouraging grantees to reach their own decisions also makes it easier to build trusting foundation-grantee relationships.

the network to hone strategy, identify emerging opportunities, and build the network's capacity to achieve outcomes. Because the work is so different than what most foundations expect of their program officers, MRBF developed a separate job title of "network officer," which describes the network-related portion of the work that program staff perform.

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Identifying Promising Networks

The first responsibility of the network officer is to identify networks that might warrant investment by the foundation. This is achieved not through a formal request-for-proposals process, but rather by using personal contacts and reconnaissance visits to learn about the networks that are involved in social change work within MRBF 's high-priority states.

Many of the networks that the Babcock Foundation ends up supporting are those where a grantee organization is an active member. The network officer finds these networks by specifically asking grantees about their partners and networks.[4] After learning about a grantee's partners and networks, the network officer follows up and selectively contacts some of these other organizations to learn about their work and their interest in being more actively engaged in specific forms of systems change.

In addition to these targeted cultivation efforts, network officers also "go on the road" to find organizations that are doing work in line with the foundation's interests. Beginning with whatever leads are available, the network officer arranges meetings with initial contacts and then asks those individuals who else should be consulted. This "snowball sampling" approach sometimes brings promising networks to the surface. In other cases, however, the surveillance work shows that the organizations doing social-change work in a region are operating largely in isolation from one another.

Brokering and Connecting

In addition to identifying networks that might be supported, MRBF network officers help organizations connect to other organizations where there might be mutual benefit. Network officers view themselves as "weavers" and "connectors." Sometimes the connections are organization-to-organization. In other cases, the network officer connects an organization to an existing network. As in the case of the Alabama coalition, the network officer encourages organizations working on related issues to connect with one another and to share their work and their challenges. The network officer might also suggest to organizations that there would be value in forming a network. However, as a rule the Babcock Foundation does not "force" organizations to come together as partners or in networks.

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[4] It is important to recognize that MRBF staff interact with grantees in ways that are much more direct, open, and honest than is true with most foundations. As a matter of course, MRBF program officers engage in lengthy, probing conversations regarding the challenges and opportunities facing the grantee. This approach is described in more detail later in the article.

Connections are also formed between non-profit organizations and funders, again with the expectation that both types of organizations can better achieve their own goals by coordinating their work. On a few occasions, MRBF network officers have played a key role in bringing funders (especially community foundations) into networks comprised primarily of nonprofit organizations. Conversely, MRBF staff have also brokered partnerships that led to a grassroots organization joining a network of funders (i.e., National Rural Funders Collaborative).

In determining when to broker an introduction between different organizations, the network officer considers how the interests of the organizations coincide with one another and how they might be able to generate synergy by working together (or at least by keeping up with one another's work). Network officers particularly look for opportunities to connect different communities within a region, as well as organizations operating in different sectors (including the business sector). Even if the organizations do not come together in a formal network, they can increase their effectiveness by learning about one another and by positioning themselves to work together on shared goals and opportunities.

Grantmaking

Once MRBF staff have identified a promising network or built connections that lead to a new network, the next step is to find the best way to support the network. Almost invariably this support will include a grantmaking component. Depending on the needs of the network, the foundation may provide funding for staff positions, core operations, programs, gatherings, and efforts to expand the network and build organizational capacity. Because networks grow and evolve, grants are given for different purposes at different points in time.

In addition to funding the network, MRBF typically funds one or more members of the network. The foundation has been particularly careful not to pit the interests of the network against the interests of the member organizations. Thus, the grants given to a convening organization do not

displace the foundation's pre-existing investment in grantees that belong to the network. Also, by funding multiple members of a network, the foundation strives to reduce the sense of scarcity and to encourage organizations to work together more openly and cooperatively. Grants are made in a manner that rewards, rather than penalizes, involvement in the network.

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In addition to supporting current members of the network, the foundation has on occasion provided grants to organizations that could strengthen a MRBF-supported network, but are not yet participating. The logic behind this type of grant is that it provides an opportunity for the network officer to enter into a relationship with an organization that has been identified as a potential contributor to a MRBF-supported network. Through that relationship, the foundation's network officer can test whether the organization actually belongs in the network and, if so, can encourage the leaders of the organization to participate.

Questioning and Advising

Grantmaking is valuable not only because it provides resources to the network, but also because it opens up channels for the network officer to have conversations with key actors in the network. Just as they do with grantee organizations,

MRBF's program staff actively engage with the networks funded by the foundation. Network officers regularly interact by phone, by email, and in person with network members as well as with anyone who provides staffing support to the network. These interactions are designed to assist the network in strengthening itself as an organization and in achieving key goals, especially those that involve systems change or public policy.

Interactions between the network officer and network members become more direct and honest over time. However, even at the outset when the network's initial grant proposal is being prepared, the network officer will ask probing questions about the network's plans and intentions. MRBF grantees – whether they are organizations or networks – have grown accustomed to hard questions and to give-and-take negotiations about how grants will be used. MRBF staff do not impose their will on grantees, but the foundation does have high standards for grantees' plans and analyses.

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In addition to asking hard questions, network officers often move into the role of an advisor. Depending on the strength of the relationship between the network and the MRBF network officer, advising can be carried out in either a responsive or assertive manner. At the very least, the network officer brings new information to the group to help the participants better understand the issues they are working on and to learn what

other groups have done to address these issues. Some of the information is formal (e.g., reports, articles, books, websites), but much of it involves the knowledge that the foundation has gained through its grantees and through its own experience as a change-oriented organization. In addition, the network officer might provide funding or referrals to allow the network to hire an organizational development consultant.

In networks where the network officer has built a strong relationship, he or she may move beyond the information-sharing role and raise specific questions or issues for the network's consideration. This can take the form of analysis or prodding. Here the network officer is serving as a catalyst in moving the network forward – through developing new strategies, carrying out an organizational assessment, taking action, contacting policymakers, recruiting new members, facing up to organizational challenges, or whatever other steps are crucial to advancing the network's mission. To prompt progress in these areas, the network officer serves a provocateur, raising difficult questions that aren't being asked – sometimes because the question isn't recognized, and sometimes because the question is obvious but network members are reluctant to ask it because it would make someone uncomfortable.

Prodding also involves bringing unstated assumptions to the surface. Like any organization, a network may fail to take full advantage of its opportunities because the members have assumed that certain tasks are beyond the scope or outside the influence of the organization. Similarly, the members may make limiting assumptions about the causes and influences associated with whatever problem with which the network is concerned. These assumptions about opportunity and causality often go untested. By bringing such assumptions to the surface, the network officer can effectively free up the network to consider a broader array of strategies and dig deeper to the root issues where action is needed.

One of the most common steps that MRBF network officers prod networks to take is a power analysis. This analysis looks at the power structure within which the group operates (e.g., who

has the power to do what?), and identifies the specific players that the group needs to engage or work with in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Network officers not only encourage this sort of analysis, but also sometimes participate in the process.

Staffing Implications

In describing the different means through which network officers support networks, it becomes clear that the position calls for a skill set that extends far beyond that of a traditional program officer. Most foundations expect their program officers to be skilled in building relationships, designing initiatives, evaluating grant proposals, and monitoring the progress of grantees. Network officers need to have skill in a variety of additional areas, including facilitation, strategic planning, organizational development, policy analysis, and building coalitions.

The network officer also needs to be well versed in the science and practice of systems change, with specific expertise in the content areas where foundation-supported networks are seeking to have an impact. This expertise needs to be tempered by strong inter-personal skills and a facility with group dynamics. Network officers need to be specifically conscious of the power they hold over networks by virtue of their role as a funder. How the network officer chooses to exercise this power is one of the most important tests of his or her ability to form authentic partnerships.

How Has This Approach Worked From the Grantee's Perspective?

In order to gain a preliminary sense of whether the Babcock Foundation's approach to supporting networks has produced benefits, interviews were conducted with leaders in five organizations that participate in MRBF-funded networks. The organizations do not represent a random sample of the foundation's grantees, but they are diverse in size, organizational structure, age, and geography. In each organization, the interview was conducted with either the executive director or a program director.

The five interviewees pointed to a number of ways that their networks have benefited from broker-

ing and advising from MRBF staff. They valued the network officer's initiative in connecting their organization to others that were interested in advancing systems change throughout the region. And they talked at length about the role that network officers had played in prodding their networks to adopt a more strategic perspective. This included:

- bringing "larger" knowledge to the network's thought process;
- promoting more "systems level" thinking;
- asking hard questions that caused the network to drill down to core issues and come up with firm priorities;
- forcing the group to consider its underlying purpose, which "allowed the group to shift from a loose network to a more strategic group"; and
- continually encouraging the network to adapt its strategy in the face of successive obstacles.

In addition to helping networks to clarify their goals and to adopt more informed and deliberate strategies, interviewees were grateful for the work that network officers did to connect their networks to funders. These referrals not only led to new resources, but also confers a sense of legitimacy on networks and the organizations in those networks.

Interviewees described instances in which the network officer went beyond making referrals and actually brought a funder into a network. Expanding the network in this way can produce benefits not only for the network (e.g., increased resources and influence), but also for the foundations that join. This positive side effect was noted in an interview with a representative of a community foundation that has been involved in a statewide network supported by MRBF. This person indicated that her perspective had expanded considerably as a result of the conversations occurring at network meetings, and that her foundation had begun to adopt a more strategic approach to grantmaking.

Challenges and Nuances

While the networks supported by the Babcock Foundation report that the grants, brokering, and advising have paid dividends in terms of

their capacity and effectiveness, it is important to recognize the challenges and potential pitfalls associated with this hands-on approach.

One of the most difficult aspects of the network officer role is maintaining the patience and focus required to work effectively with networks that move only gradually toward impact.

According to MRBF staff, one of the most difficult aspects of the network officer role is maintaining the patience and focus required to work effectively with networks that move only gradually toward impact. Long-term funding and relationships are required of the foundation, which in turn requires continual reaffirmation of the larger strategy on the part of both staff and board.

Another major challenge involves the question of what is an appropriate relationship for the network officer to form with any given network. On the one hand, the network officer is arguably most effective when she or he is able to engage directly and honestly with the members of the network. On the other hand, direct engagement can be viewed as intrusive, especially during the early stages of the network's relationship with the foundation. In practice, a more direct and open approach emerges over time as the network officer and the network members work together closely and honestly on common issues and shared concerns.

As a network officer becomes a more trusted advisor, there is an inherent risk that the network will become overly dependent on the officer's expertise, perspective, and resources. MRBF staff are acutely aware of this risk and make a deliberate effort to maintain an "outsider" role when working with networks.

It is inevitable that network officers will feel a strong allegiance to networks. This raises the possibility of a "dual agency" problem. The network officer is first and foremost an agent of the foundation (working to advance the foundation's mission and interests), but he or she also seeks to serve as a vital resource to the networks supported by the foundation. In most instances there is no conflict between these two roles because MRBF invests in networks that are doing work that coincides with the interests of the foundation. However, there is always the possibility that a network will move in a new direction at odds with the foundation's interests. In such a case, the network officer may end up in the awkward position of retreating from a network where he or she has played an active role.

Although MRBF's network officers intentionally maintain an arms-length distance from the networks funded by the foundation, there is every reason to expect that this is still close enough to influence the shape and direction taken by a network. Indeed, that expectation is explicitly incorporated into the Babcock Foundation's theory of change.[5]

As noted earlier, the foundation has specific assumptions about the sorts of capacity that networks need to build, including a clearer sense of purpose, sharper strategy, increased credibility, connections to funders, and diversity in network membership. More rigorous evaluations are required to assess whether the Babcock model actually helps to build capacity in these ways, and whether these forms of capacity translate into systems-level impacts. These evaluations will need to consider the developmental process that systems-change networks undergo (Easterling & Arnold, 2011). How long does it take for systems-change networks to become strategic and effective, even under the best of circumstances? What types of behavior, action, and relationships should we look for as early markers that the network is developing toward effectiveness? Identifying good proximal indicators of network effectiveness is especially important in cases

[5] See http://www.mrbf.org/resource.aspx?catId=5#MRBF_Theory_of_Change

where the network is working on entrenched societal issues that are unlikely to be solved during a foundation board member's lifetime.

Conclusion

The Babcock Foundation is one of a growing number of foundations that have come to appreciate the role that networks can play in achieving broad systems change. It has distinguished itself from these other foundations with regard to the specific approach it uses to support networks. Many foundations prompt the creation of new networks, usually by offering grants to coalitions that convene around the foundation's area of interest. In contrast, MRBF invests primarily in existing coalitions that have established their purpose in advance of the foundation's involvement. These "indigenous" networks tend to be more intrinsically meaningful to participants than are networks that form in response to a pool of grant dollars. As a result, they are arguably better vehicles for achieving long-term impacts.

Among the relatively small group of funders that invest in pre-existing networks, the Babcock Foundation stands out as being more "hands on" in its dealings with the people and the organizations involved in a network.   The grantmaking process is accompanied by more intensive funder-grantee interaction than occurs with most funders. Likewise, MRBF staff play an active role in connecting like-minded organizations with one another and in connecting organizations and people to networks that have compatible aspirations. And MRBF staff involve themselves directly in the business of the networks they support – by providing information, offering analysis, and asking questions about the network's purpose, assumptions, and strategies.

While there is evidence that MRBF's strategy has strengthened networks, it is important to remain sensitive to the potential risks of working with a network (or any grantee) in such a hands-on manner. There is always the chance that the foundation will end up being overly directive in moving a network toward a particular mission or strategy, possibly causing the network to act against the interests of the members. The

Babcock Foundation manages this risk by hiring and training network officers who are skilled in coaching and facilitation. These network officers continually reiterate to funded groups that it is up to them to make their own decisions in line with the needs and goals of the communities they serve.

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The network officer approach pioneered by the Babcock Foundation directly addresses some of the factors that most limit the effectiveness of networks, including a lack of clarity in purpose and inadequate analysis in the design of strategy. However, for a foundation to succeed with this approach, the board and staff need to commit to partnering with grantees in ways that may be both unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Just as important, the foundation needs to have staff with the skills and disposition to serve as an effective advisor in high-stakes situations. Assuming that the foundation can meet these challenges, the MRBF approach may turn out to be the most effective way to assist networks in achieving their full potential potential. Likewise, hiring and deploying skilled network officers may be one of the most valuable things a foundation can do to cultivate collective impact.

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