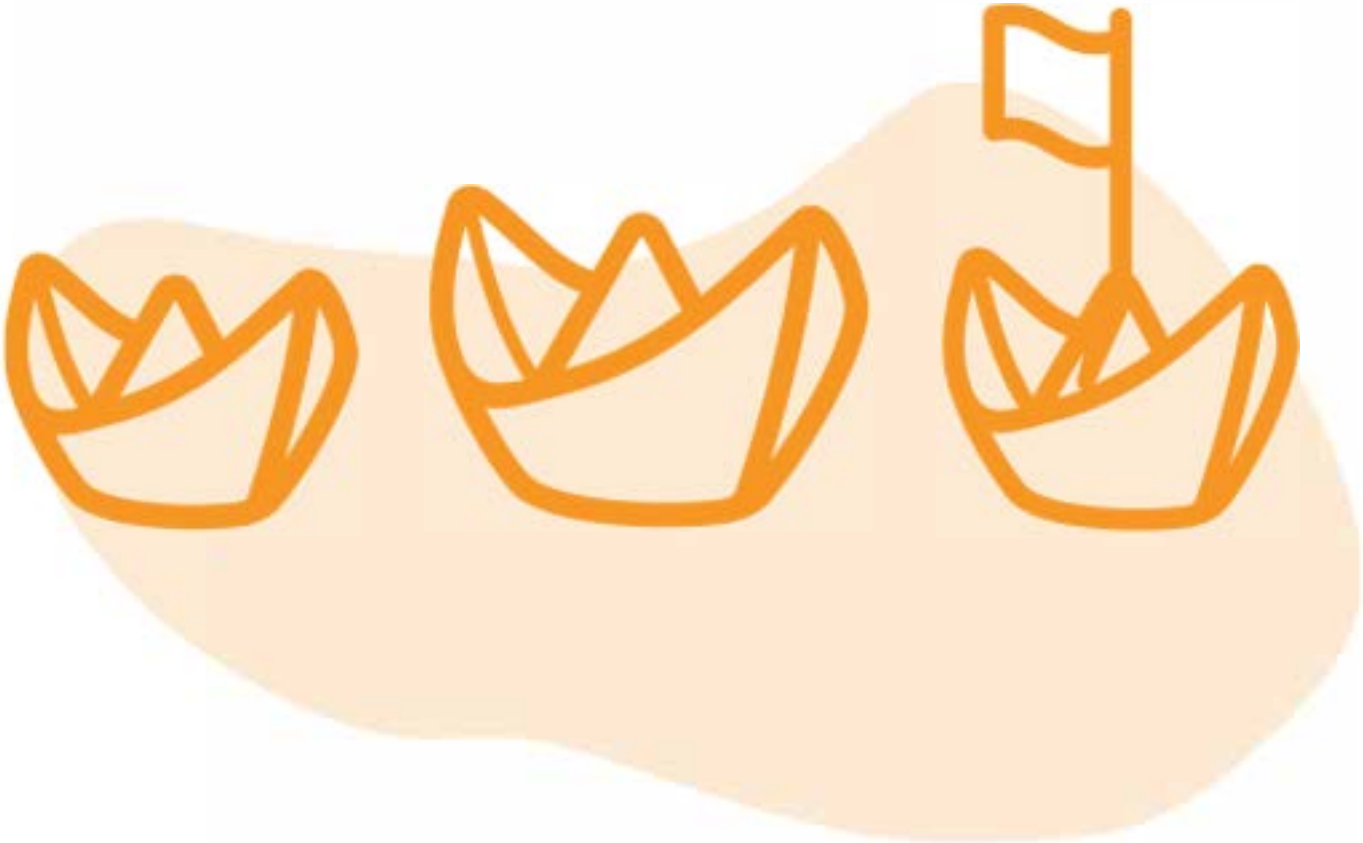
Civil Society Capability - Leadership



STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

July 2022

STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

The Sydney Policy Lab, supported by the Paul Ramsey Foundation, has launched the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative. This bold new project aims to capture and share insights for a strong and re-energised Australian civil society.

The first major research report from the Strengthening Australian Civil Society initiative was released in February 2022: the report *Nurturing Links Across Civil Society – Lessons from Australia's For Profit Sector's Response to COVID-19.*

The research report focused on identifying insights for civil society organisations, policy makers and funders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It engaged a wide range of people and organisations across Australia.

This summary is one in a series which includes extracts from that major research report. It highlights one of the key capability areas essential for those working to build and support strong and resilient communities – leadership.

It identifies barriers, enablers and opportunities to developing leadership as a practice and offers recommendations for those interested in strengthening civil society capability.

To read the full research report, or to access the other summary reports and stories collected by the Strengthening Australian Civil Society project, visit the Sydney Policy Lab website.

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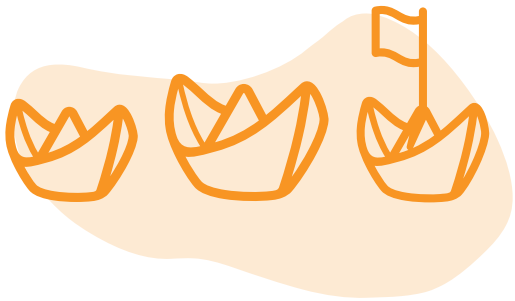
Civil Society Capabilities

Interconnected skills and focus areas for supporting communities

LEADERSHIP



Strong leaders create relationships across difference, foster leadership in others, and act collectively in response to change.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

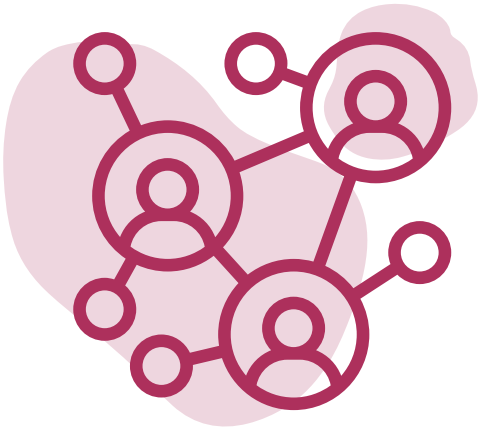
Organisations need to ensure that people are at the forefront of designing and implementing solutions to the challenges they face.

STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE

Effective advocacy is strategic, collaborative and genuinely involves those affected by disadvantage in all aspects of a campaign.

SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS



Civil society is stronger when people, communities and organisations work in collaboration and build cultures of learning.

Capability Area 1: Leadership

Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, breaking down entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage for the benefit of people and communities. If we think about leadership as a skill that can be developed, rather than a position that is inherited or bestowed, we start to ask important questions such as: How does civil society avoid getting stuck in old ways of working, losing sight of the bigger picture? How can relationships be forged across difference? And how can leadership be best fostered in others?

Introduction

Leadership has been greatly in demand since the COVID-19 pandemic begun. We do not need to look far to see examples of leadership in action: scientists and health experts trying to understand and contain the virus, political leaders attempting to make tough decisions to meet emerging social and economic need, and community members stepping up to support their neighbours in times of crisis.

Leadership during COVID-19 has come in various forms across civil society too. People leading organisations needed to weigh up their responsibilities to the staff and the communities they serve. Public events needed to be cancelled or moved online. People needed to transition to working from home and find new ways to do tasks which had been done face-to-face. Long-planned projects and strategies needed to be completely rethought and resources reprioritised.

The COVID crisis has accentuated the need for leaders. Four things I've admired are: decisive action; compassion; consultation; and trusting science.

Clinton Free, *Director, Executive Education, University of Sydney*[1]

Leadership emerged, in particular, in mutual aid activities - people getting together to "form collectives with neighbours to help each other without the usual incentives."[2] Often organised via social media, Australians worked with small businesses like chemists and local bakeries to collect and distribute food and health supplies to people stuck at home. In well-publicised public events like the Melbourne Towers lockdown, community members worked behind the scenes to help each other. Civil society strategist Anita Tang observed this as "examples of people without positional leadership leading," coming "from places that are separate from what we might think of as formal civil society."[3]

Recent scholarship on leadership increasingly conceives it as a *practice* rather than a *position*. In his celebrated *The Powers to Lead*, Joseph Nye suggests that we are in an era of *post-heroic leadership*, where effective leadership "depends less on the heroic actions of a few individuals at the top and more on collaborative leadership practices distributed throughout an organization."[4] Competitiveness, positional authority and demand-oriented behaviour involving threats or conventional incentives is replaced by collaboration, distributed leadership, and encouraging collective participation. According to Nye, among the complex and interconnected systems and networks, "hierarchical, command-and-control approaches simply do not work anymore. They impede information flows inside companies, hampering the fluid and collaborative nature of work today."[5]

Along these lines, three intersecting approaches to modern leadership capability are *Adaptive Leadership, Systems Leadership* and *Cross-sector Leadership*, all of which emphasise the need to lead in complex contexts. Broad capabilities across these include ongoing and continuous learning and conversation, keeping an eye on "the big picture" to anticipate future trends, clear communication and articulation of collective vision and goals, and a focus on long-term impact as opposed to solely short-term responsiveness.[6] In these contexts, a crucial factor recognised as contributing to why collaboration falls short is "because they failed to foster collective leadership within and across the collaborating organisations."[7] Similarly, celebrated community organiser and Harvard academic

Marshall Ganz describes leadership "as accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty. Leaders accept responsibility not only for their individual 'part' of the work, but also for the collective 'whole'."[8]

Many aspects of leading in complex environments overlap with conditions of crises like COVID-19. As Ben Ramalingam et al. note in the *Harvard Business Review*, situations are "constantly evolving, with leaders facing unpredictability, imperfect information, multiple unknowns, and the need to identify responses quickly – all while recognizing the multi-dimensional (health-related, economic, social, political, cultural) nature of the crisis."[9] For Nye, leaders should view crises as an opportunity for change, relaxing "the normal constraints that limit their power and action."[10] Here, the ability to remain calm in high stress environments becomes critical, for both decision making and communicating with others. Such moments of crisis do create some pressure towards a more concentrated system of leadership, with reliance on the "person at the top" to make key decisions swiftly and implement them effectively. However, they also generate pressure towards a more distributed, collaborative leadership style, with a need to avoid "groupthink" and to seize on the "greater creativity of a more diverse group."[11]

As we move further out of the immediate crisis into our new conditions in a post-COVID-19 world, funders, decision makers, change makers and community members all have a vested interest in understanding what leadership is and how to cultivate and develop it across society.

Over the past year, through interactions with hundreds of civil society leaders across Australia and beyond about their experiences with COVID-19, Strengthening Australian Civil Society researchers have heard stories of how people and organisations have been striving to lead during the pandemic.

Based on this research and academic learnings, this chapter offers insights into three barriers identified in academic research and by civil society leaders that are holding people, communities and organisations back from leading more effectively: failing to see the bigger picture, being consumed by operational matters and path dependency. It then identifies three capability areas to focus on to enhance and grow strong leadership skills: collectively adapting in response to change, creating relationships across difference and fostering leadership in others.

Finally, key principles which research showed could contribute to stronger and more effective leadership, and grow links across civil society, are offered as areas for further exploration, research, and discussion:

(1) Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, often challenging entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage. To succeed in this role, organisations need to work collaboratively to take calculated risks.
(2) Leadership is a skill that can be nurtured and developed. It is also important to look beyond notions of top-down leadership and understand that leadership requires careful cultivation of respectful relationships within existing networks, as well as new connections across difference.
(3) An important aspect of leadership is recognising the leadership of others, nurturing emerging leaders within organisations and networks, along with looking for, engaging with, and encouraging leadership in communities that civil society organisations aim to represent and serve.

A common theme emerging from the experiences of civil society leadership during COVID-19 is that leadership is at its best when it is collaborative and acknowledges the leadership capacity of others. This aligns with the idea of being in a *post-heroic* era of leadership. Rather than looking to the strength of isolated individuals, it is in the strength of relationships that leadership ought to be fostered.

What Stops Australian Civil Society from Leading Effectively?

Leadership is difficult. It doesn't matter whether you are the Prime Minister of Australia attempting to lead through a pandemic or a community member trying to lead a campaign to keep a local childcare centre open, leaders of all shapes and sizes face similar types of challenges and require similar types of skills, just in different contexts and at different scales.

As one civil society leader reflected:

> ***I think that some civil society organisations are just as hierarchical as any other institution. I think their operating models are deeply traditional. I think they're slow. I think they're driven by procurement policy, and they are risk adverse. And again, they are structured around these very old notions of leadership, and what good leadership is and people needing to feel powerful. They do some good work too, don't get me wrong. I think one of the biggest issues we have in this country is the growing chasm between our institutions and our people. I think that civil society organisations need to find a way to close that gap, to show others how to close that gap. Because I think, at the moment, that's one of the biggest risks we have as a country, is that growing divide.***[12]

Through our research, the Strenghtening Aus Civil Society research team has identified three key structural forces which are seen to create problems and hold them in place.

Failing to See the Bigger Picture

Even outside a once in a lifetime pandemic, for-purpose organisations face multiple challenges which impact their ability to act strategically.

These factors include working with constrained resources, strict contractual requirements from funders, responding to immediate needs, and changing external circumstances. These and other factors compete to keep practitioners consumed by the day to day, leaving little time or headspace for reflection on purpose, let alone any necessary realignment. Peter Mares of the Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership employs a windsurfer analogy to explain this phenomenon:

> ***The temptation is to look at your feet, but actually you need to keep your eyes on the horizon otherwise you're going to fall in the water. That idea of keeping the goal in mind to inform the day to day. This gets harder in a pandemic or when you're juggling things. There needs to be relief for people to step back rather than step above.***
>
> **Peter Mares,**
> ***Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership***[13]

Stanford academics David Smith and Jeanine Becker note how, from a mechanical sense, "systems are perfectly designed to produce the results they produce."[14] As such, leaders who do not regularly lift themselves out of the day to day run the risk of neglecting, perpetuating, and reinforcing problems within their systems that they say they are trying to solve. Meeting this strategic challenge at any level involves power. As Marshall Ganz notes: "In an interdependent world of competition and cooperation, using one's resources to achieve one's goal often requires deploying those resources to influence the interests of others who hold a resource one needs – power."[15]

Systems leadership theorist Peter Senge suggests that leaders need to be able to step out and see their operating environment from a "systems mapping" level. They can then create a "picture of the relationship and interdependence between the boundaries they normally assume"[16] – those external pressures which motivate behaviour in an organisation and often pull civil society leaders away from the bigger picture. In this way, leaders will be able to understand how they can alter and redefine aspects of the system they control.

In an interview with a Strengthening Australian Civil Society researcher, civil society facilitator and strategist Ann Porcino warned of the sector-wide long-term impact of succumbing to those pressures:

> ***...we find ourselves running corporations that are delivering products to their customers instead of organisations who are thinking about how do we bring about change to the lives of the people that we are here to support or advocate for, whatever their role is.***
>
> **Ann Porcino,** ***RPR Consulting***[17]

Similarly, Sydney-based social innovator Lee Cooper from Radical Box observed how the inability to think big meant that the strategies put into place to address homelessness during the pandemic were "done in a way to plug the temporary problem but not provide long-term solutions", so that once the height of the pandemic was over, similar problems began to re-emerge.[18]

When it comes to "thinking big", intentionally focusing on purpose can help guide more strategic interventions. Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer of Sydney Community Forum described her approach to starting at a new organisation, or entering a new network, as consciously playing the role of a "rank outsider without any vested interest," allowing her to ask potentially provocative questions which get to the question of "purpose and vision and all of those things."[19]

For Michele Goldman at Asthma Australia, the bigger picture is that "we don't want to perpetuate our existence. We want to work towards a time when our job is done."[20] Tessa Boyd-Caine from Health Justice Australia reported that an important part of her role as the leader of an intermediary organisation was bringing together people across their network and "really working with them to identify the systemic issues that they are coming up against and to start to plot ways to collaborate around tackling those."[21]

Risk Aversion and the Day-to-Day

Time and time again participants stressed the importance of civil society leaders recognising the difference between leading and managing an organisation. This challenge can vary depending on the size of the organisation. Larger organisations can have the luxury of separate roles for someone who sets, drives and communicates the strategic direction and someone who operationalises the strategy. Yet even some bigger organisations can be overly focused on internal goals such as maintaining funding levels and growing the organisation. Smaller organisations, however, are frequently required to combine operations and strategy. This can understandably see leaders of organisations becoming immersed in the day-to-day needs of the organisation and the people with whom they work.

Being overly focused on an organisation's operations can seriously impact its effectiveness. Risk aversion can also stunt innovation and opportunity.[22] Nye identifies business management training as bearing the responsibility for many of these practices, with managers being urged to "merely embrace process and seek stability, while leaders tolerate risk and create change."[23] Peter Mares observes that leaders "have to act on uncertain knowledge. You can't always wait for more information. Of course, you gather what information you can in the time available, but in the end, you have to act on uncertain or contested knowledge, while taking into account a range of valid but competing interests and rights."[24]

When local bakery owners Dave and Bev Winter went to their local council and Rotary Club for support for their idea of a volunteer-driven food distribution for elderly and at-risk community members, the small business owners were turned down because of perceived risk. "It's extraordinary, there was no support at all from them," Dave said. The Winters persisted and eventually got a state government green light for their initiative, which provided more than 10,000 meals at a personal cost to the Winters of $90,000.

> ***It's a question of what's required? Like if something comes up, you do need to do a risk analysis. Fine, you do it, but it's not going to stop you. If people try and stop you and get in the way, you literally have to sometimes steam roller the whole thing and that's what this was.***
> **Dave Winter**, *small business owner*[25]

Along a similar vein, other participants pointed to problems stemming from an over-reliance on *evidence-based policy* and *measuring impact*. Can Yasmut from the Local Community Services Association, for example, noted how "the challenge of evidence-based policy is that it builds on incremental improvements at best – to be innovative you need to be evidence *making*."[26]

Ann Porcino, RPR Consulting, observed how some organisations she works with say, "we can't do anything unless we measure impact", which "doesn't allow for new ideas or ways of approaching things to come up."27 During 2020, Porcino worked with a network of Australian arts organisations and observed two very different approaches to the challenges of the pandemic. While many arts organisations used the opportunity to collaborate with others around the world and explore new ways of bringing their collections and cultural education programs to the public, others became more insular and looked for ways to cut costs while no one was walking through the front door. "Their mind is on what they think the funder wants them to do, not on what they were created to do," Porcino said.

Path Dependency

A crucial capability in systems leadership is the need to "follow the energy" and put existing plans aside when new opportunities and possibilities open. Unfortunately, leaders can often become stuck in old ways, following the established "path" within their organisation, which stops them from effectively being able to engage with others and take advantage of emerging opportunities. Writing in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania identify this as stemming from an inability to break free of their own established perspectives, resulting from "personal and professional demographics, background, institutional resources and social network."[28] In the same publication, David Smith and Jeanine Becker note that this in turn can "undermine the need for empathy and being able to understand the experience of those directly affected and what our own role in perpetuating the problem might be."[29]

For Radical Box's Lee Cooper, "a lot of the civil society sector relies on doing things as they have always done," which impedes real movement on issues such as homelessness. In an interview with researchers, Cooper observed that funders and much of the sector are stuck on counting widgets like available beds or putting a plate on the table, when for the people involved what is more important is the sense of a safe communal space to engage with others, being part of a community and able to access support.[30]

For Wiradjuri man and start-up founder Jason Glanville, the idea of "service" is crucial to creating hope, truth, and authenticity in civil society leadership, and for enabling leaders to step outside of their own narrow perspective.

> ***Leadership is a doing, not a position. An action and habit. And we've lost that. I don't know that there's enough service in leadership to convince me that people in leadership positions care about the things most Australians care about.***
>
> **Jason Glanville,** ***Australian Indigenous Governance Institute***[31]

Not being able to adapt and move past our preconceptions undermines the important leadership capability of being able to learn and adapt through experience. Ramalingam et al. identify that a feature of *adaptive leadership* is that "teams and organizations need to constantly assess their actions, recognising that they will have to continuously iterate and adapt their interventions as they learn more about the outcomes of decisions."[32]

Along these lines, CEO of the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) Carolyn Curtis observed in an interview "the sense of possibility that has emerged through COVID, to be agile, to innovate and to work with people," and how the challenge was now to leverage this "as opposed to revert back to our previous state."[33] Néha Madhok from Democracy in Colour said one of their key reflections from 2020 was that "people felt like they were taking a lot of direction from the top." During COVID-19, Néha and Co-Director Tim Lo Surdo realised that they were making rapid decisions and some of the people in the team, particularly people new to campaigning, "felt like they were being left behind." Learning from their experience, Néha and the team are committed to "going back and having conversations with people to figure out what went wrong."[34]

INSIGHT: Craig Foster and Play for Lives[35]

Craig Foster, former Socceroo and passionate advocate for refugees and human rights, saw in the pandemic an opportunity for both amateur and professional athletes to use their position as important actors in civil society. He reflected: "Sport spends a lot of time and energy and money on promoting programs of social responsibility and promoting what it says are principles of building better, more resilient connected societies. This was an opportunity to actually live that."

Early in the pandemic, Foster realized the need for a new volunteer base – due to increased need as well as the fact that many existing older volunteers would need to isolate to protect their health. In response, Foster established a volunteer workforce whose activities ranged from members of local sporting clubs delivering food to international students to professional athletes supporting sick children with video messages.

Foster levered his networks across multiple sectors to encourage others to get involved, including relying on relationships with high profile athletes such as Australian Football League (AFL) stars Adam Goodes, Tadhg Kennelly and Luke Parker. He also acted as an intermediary between Football Federation Australia, with its two million members, and the Red Cross, helping forge a collaborative partnership aiming to support vulnerable communities.

In particular, Foster worked closely with Addison Road Community Organisation in Sydney (Addi Road), to establish and demonstrate the value of a community based not-for-profit food aid operation. "I went down to Addi Road and said, Okay, I'm going to bring sport on site here and we're going to tell that story publicly to facilitate and amplify it and bring everyone else on board. I worked within the Inner West Council, who reached out to all of their local sporting organisations, and I think we ended up with about 16 sporting organisations who came down. We had baseball, netball, AFL, all of these.

"The local clubs got on board, we brought them all down, told them about what was going to happen, and we got a roster in place through the website, which was the Be Collective, which was just a digital vehicle to connect people and so we volunteered. Then after that, of course, that morphed into many ways to help."

Generally, Foster sees sporting clubs and organisations powerful players within civil society which should become activated and lead in times of crisis. "Sport has the responsibility to speak up on important social issues that affect us all," Foster says.

What Facilitates Better Leadership?

Like all other skills, leadership is a muscle can be exercised and strengthened. Through research into leadership theory and conversations with civil society practitioners during COVID-19, Strenghtening Aus Civil Society researchers identified key practices that individuals and organisations can adopt to do this. These practices recognise that having a formal leadership position within an organisation does not necessarily make someone a good leader, and that effective leaders actively enable new leaders to emerge from within their organisations and communities they are there to serve. Particularly in the modern era, when it is so important to work in collaboration, leaders also need to be as conscious of developing their own capabilities as they are of those around them.

Collectively Adapting in Response to Change

COVID-19 has been a complex crisis – with economic, social and political crises sitting within a public health crisis. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, academics Ramalingam et al. note that this has required:

changes in behaviours and incentives and in the relationships between different groups and organisations. Collective action in this regard might be in the form of coordination (e.g. among businesses), partnerships among different interest groups (e.g. businesses and communities), or dialogue across a range of stakeholders. Adaptive leadership has a crucial role to play in helping to identify shared alignment of objectives and scope for collective action across different silos and levels of the response. Such interactions enrich debate, are inclusive, and improve ownership of decisions."[36]

Working as a leader in a more distributed and less hierarchical way brings with it particular challenges when it comes to facilitating decision making, clear communication channels and mobilising an organisation, network or movement towards collective action. Circumstances and information can change day to day during a crisis. Ramalingam et al. note that this means: "Decision makers at different levels therefore need to be clear about what they are basing their assumptions and hypotheses on. They need to explain what is being done and why, and how a decision was made, so that if errors are identified, trust can still be maintained in the process."[37]

Public policy scholars Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell and Paul t'Hart observe that within shifting circumstances and crises, leaders are responsible for holding and projecting a collective story or "public narrative", requiring "the need for clear, timely, consistent and repeated messaging and actionable advice, delivered by credible sources."[38] Harvard academic and community organiser Marshall Ganz observes that, to be effective a public narrative needs to combine values that resonate with and motivate individuals, a "story of us" which brings these shared values into collective actions, and "a story of now" which communicates the urgency and importance of the moment.[39]

Joseph Nye similarly describes leaders as "surfers waiting for a big wave". Surfers don't have control over when the waves are going to arrive or how big they are going to be, but with experience they can learn how to anticipate when they are coming and know what to do when they arrive. Similarly, "individuals do not control events or structures, but can anticipate them and bend them to their purpose to some degree… Leaders matter when they have the intuition and skills to take advantage of those windows while they are open."[40]

There needs to be innovative thinking. Then there needs to be practical thinking – it needs to be workable. It needs to fly. Idealism is necessary but so is tempering it with practical politics and so therefore the need to build coalitions and alliances.
Peter Mares, *Cranlana Centre for Ethical Leadership*[41]

In a focus group on leadership, experienced civil society leadership coach Roger West observed that "people telling the truth is important in crisis. And then engendering a sense of *we can get through this.*"[42] In the same setting, Moo Baulch, Violence Prevention specialist and Director of Primary Prevention at Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC), shared a story about the way a leader she worked with during the pandemic both kept a cool head to "keep staff calm, and has led by building a senior leadership team to spread that power and accountability out so it's not all in one person."[43] Jason Glanville, Chairperson from the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, noted that in collaborative spaces people make time "to decide and define who is doing what, which results in individual voices and actions empowered by the collective."[44]

In an interview, Bassina Farbenblum – UNSW Faculty of Law and Justice Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative – observed that collaborative networks still require individual action. This includes someone taking charge of ensuring accountability, creating concrete roles and keeping things moving forward. As an example, she noted that David Barrow of the Sydney Alliance was "absolutely extraordinary" at chairing meetings during COVID-19 with:

> ***unions, NGOs, refugee groups, migrant groups, international students, academics and lawyers. […] It could have been a messy talkfest that went nowhere, and it wasn't. He didn't really let people just say, Well, we should do this. He pressed for commitments and details and asked, 'Well, who's going to do that? And then, what are you going to do and when are you going to do it?'"***[45]

Building Relationships Across Difference

Being able to work with people with different views, from different backgrounds, living and working in different contexts is essential for creating the shared sense of purpose that a successful leader requires. Marshall Ganz has observed that, "because relationships are beginnings, not endings, they create opportunities for interests to grow, change and develop," and that leaders need to be able to enable "teams to engage with conflict without suppressing it, and to differ without personalising difference."[46]

While crucially important, this practice can take people outside of their comfort zone. Senge, Hamilton and Kramer note that most people tend towards feeling more comfortable "with those with whom we share a common history and views," and the longer that we know and interact with people, the more we find ways to align with them. It is much harder to forge new relationships with people "who are at different stages of their developmental journeys," particularly amidst evolving circumstances and time pressures.[47] Smith and Becker observe that creating relationships across differences requires spaces "to understand one another's experiences, desires and pressures." At the early stages of a collaboration or new relationship, it can be important to "take small steps and produce early wins to build trust and momentum" and a shared sense of ownership.[48]

Along these lines, part of the practice of collaborative impact projects, such as the Maranguka justice reinvestment initiative in the small town of Bourke in remote NSW, is the implementation of "circuit breakers" – quick and achievable initiatives that have an immediate impact. Two examples of these in Bourke were introducing a free drivers' education and licensing program to reduce the number of traffic offences and securing funding for a skate park in the centre of town to give young people something to do and help them feel part of the broader community.[49]

In an interview, Teresa Brierley, who works for the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and is part of the Hunter Community Alliance, described how the challenge of engaging young people in the Church can be because senior people within the Church often have fixed views about how people should be involved in Church life. With COVID-19 shifting things online, an opportunity emerged to better engage with young people. Brierley noted that while young people have "rejected the worship side, they probably aren't nourished by

the theological side of the scriptures." Instead, Brierley and those she works with try to focus on "the mission" and social justice, and engage and start conversations with people who, while they might not attend Church like their parents did, are trying to make a difference in civil society because "they see a connection with a higher purpose which calls them to connect with and strive for the common good."[50]

Laura Barnes, who facilitates the Australia Together Alliance of organisations such as National Shelter, Logan Together, Inclusive Growth Partners and the Minderoo Foundation, observed that they approach:

> ***the alliance partnership group up as a sandpit. It's an opportunity for us to live, practice the ideas of being a bit brave, being courageous in our conversations, but also having a space of reflection.***
> **Laura Barnes**, *Australia Together*[51]

For Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer of Sydney Community Forum, part of the challenge with creating relationships across difference is that "we sanitise relationships into the perfect idealised relationship, where if it's ugly, we think it's dysfunctional."[52] She observed the importance of sitting in discomfort and listening to people. "The moment we acknowledge the origins of our lives, and all the kinds of amazing things that have been possible, then all kinds of amazing things become possible together." Civil society facilitator and strategist Ann Porcino observed that "Good leaders genuinely want to know what people think, and decisions that get made are influenced by those opinions in the room."[53]

Fostering Leadership in Others

Supporting the development of leadership skills in others has long been regarded as a fundamental attribute of effective leadership. According to ancient Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu, when we "fail to honour people; they fail to honour you." A good leader is one "who talks little. When [a leader's] work is done, [their] aims fulfilled, people will all say, *we did this ourselves*."[54]

In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Senge, Hamilton and Kania argue that while "ineffective leaders try to make change happen, system leaders focus on creating the conditions that can produce change and that can eventually cause change to be self-sustaining."[55] They point out that:

collective wisdom cannot be manufactured or built into a plan created in advance. And it is not likely to come from leaders who seek to 'drive' their predetermined change agenda. Instead, system leaders work to create the space where people living with the problem can come together to tell the truth, think more deeply about what is really happening, explore options beyond popular thinking, and search for higher leverage changes through progressive cycles of action and reflection and learning over time.[56]

According to Ganz, a systems approach to leadership requires restructuring ideas of leadership "away from the dominant model of a heroic individual, standing in the face of cosmic challenge, to a team approach."[57] Oxford University leadership theorists John Stokes and Sue Dopson describe this as a practice shift from "ego to eco."[58] They also note that, based on interviews with 25 cross-sector leaders, one of the key capabilities leaders would like to develop is "learning how to shape the context of the work that they and their colleagues are undertaking, rather than always acting from the front."[59]

In an interview, the Sydney Alliance's Thuy Linh Nguyen observed that a key part of the mission of the Sydney Alliance's Voices for Power Project is training "community ambassadors".[60] Voices for Power works in various Western Sydney communities to support people with education around their energy bills, engaging in capacity building so community members can act collectively and advocate at a community level. Thuy Linh Nguyen notes that "there is a leadership development aspect, definitely, amongst those community ambassadors, who feel a strong sense of empowerment."[61]

This is about challenging traditional ideas of what we think leadership looks like. What is civil society's role in fostering leadership, and broadening the lens of what it looks like. Civil society can enable conditions so that citizens can lead in the way that is needed to address the challenges they face.
Liz Skelton, *Collaboration for Impact*[62]

At an organisational level, Jane Hunt of The Front Project and Michele Goldman of Asthma Australia are two Australian civil society leaders consciously trying to develop new leadership within their organisations. Hunt has attempted to create an environment where "each person, it doesn't matter where they sit in the organisation, is expected to take up leadership. We invest in monthly leadership sessions. We invest in coaching. For some people it's the first time anyone's actually asked them to do this kind of work."[63] Under Michelle Goldman's leadership, Asthma Australia has shifted from a model where they primarily operated independently as a research and advocacy organisation, to one that takes a conscious leadership role in partnerships and networks, making important decisions about when to "step back" and "relinquish power" and "work less in silos and try and work more project-based." The organisation has been supported in this process by an encouraging board, an engaged membership and network partners with strong connections to community.[64]

Finally, it is important to have awareness that different people will have different ideas of what good leadership. Liz Skelton from Collaboration for Impact observed that "we fall into traditional patterns of leadership. We need to start with the people most impacted first, asking them and letting it come from them, because what I think leadership looks like and what they think leadership looks like is often very different."[65] Along similar lines, Jason Glanville noted in a focus group that leadership development work often goes unnoticed and unappreciated: "There are women and men in communities that no one knows, but they are doing nation-building work."[66] At a community level, Kim Webber from CoHealth observed that a "game changer" for their organisation during COVID-19 came from the Victorian Government recognising that the community leadership and development work that CoHealth funded itself, which "no one is funding or thinks is important, was actually a critical part of our COVID response in Victoria."[67]

INSIGHT: The Australian Centre of Social Innovation[68]

Leadership was front of mind for The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) CEO Carolyn Curtis in the process of fundamentally altering the Centre's structure and ways of working. As Curtis observed in an interview, TACSI has moved from a "traditional, centralised hierarchical structure" to a "organisational network model, where you have multiple hierarchies that are based more around skills, wisdom, expertise, experience, as opposed to power and decision making."

The new approach differed substantially from the previous situation where "people were making decisions because they were in a chain of command. Not necessarily because they were the best person to make that decision, and actually understood the most about what that situation was."

Curtis observed that shifting to new decision-making structure threw up challenges. "We needed to make sure that the right people, with the right experience and expertise were making the right decisions." She noted, "from day one, when I started at TACSI, I kid you not, I used to always hear like little whispers, 'Why does that person get to do that? Why does that person get to make that decision?'"

When it comes to the various communities across Australia that TACSI works with, Curtis observed how often leadership emerges within communities, despite people facing "quite deep-seated, intergenerational risk factors." TACSI have found leaders in unexpected places, including in a farmer, a young person, someone who had lost a friend to suicide, and the owner of the local hardware store. Curtis noted that many of these people have "remarkable potential, remarkable grit and quite profound natural leadership."

"I think we're just so hardwired to [understand] quite traditional notions of leadership," Curtis said. "I think what we're discovering through this work is there is a deeper, more connected sense of leadership that emerges when someone is so connected to that place." So, "if you have been a community member and grown up born and bred in Ceduna your care, your love, your passion, your commitment to Ceduna, is going to far surpass any care of a politician, of bureaucrats."

Principles for Strengthening Leadership Capability

The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of civil society leadership in a number of important ways and offers opportunities to reflect and reshape our leadership practice into the future. This includes the opportunity to learn from leaders who have shone during the pandemic, particularly those who have emerged from surprising places or in the face of significant obstacles.

A common thread throughout this research has been an appetite for building strong connections and relationships with others. This aligns with observations that the command-and-control style of "heroic" leadership has had its day, and that effective leadership demands the development of collaborative and powerful relationships.

In order to support those interested in fostering leadership capability across Australian civil society, the research process has identified three important principles for developing leadership capability:

(1) Non-government, non-profit and for-purpose organisations can play an important leadership role in society, often challenging entrenched power structures and systemic disadvantage. To succeed in this role, organisations need to work collaboratively to take calculated risks.
(2) Leadership is a skill that can be nurtured and developed. It is also important to look beyond notions of top-down leadership and understand that leadership requires careful cultivation of respectful relationships within existing networks, as well as new connections across difference.
(3) An important aspect of leadership is recognising the leadership of others, nurturing emerging leaders within organisations and networks, along with looking for, engaging with, and encouraging leadership in communities that civil society organisations aim to represent and serve.

Each of these principles deserves further discussion and reflection and are offered as stepping off points for future examination of civil society leadership capabilities. They should prompt some tough questions for Australian civil society practitioners, those who fund civil society organisations and the policymakers who create the broad authorising environment.

If leadership is a skill that needs to be embedded across organisations and communities what are practitioners, funders and decisionmakers doing to develop these capabilities? How can leaders of organisations develop and foster leadership within their teams? What role can funders playing in developing leadership capability in the organisations they fund? How can powerful and entrenched organisations and structures shift in order to make way for grassroots leadership to emerge?

These principles suggest that more dynamic and inclusive styles of leadership may require the creation of new organisational structures. People having held leadership for long periods may need to relinquish some of that power to emerging leaders. To meet the demands of current and future crises, those in leadership positions will need to make tough decisions and take responsibility for them, with full knowledge that all decisions are made under pressure and with incomplete information.

If those in leadership positions cannot take bold and informed risks, if they cannot hold the collective story of what they are trying to do, if they cannot make space for leadership to emerge around them, can they truly be called leaders?

Conclusion and Recommendations

The experiences of 2020 and 2021 will live long in the memory of countries across the world. When each of us first heard of COVID-19, very few of us could have imagined the upheaval and heartbreak that it would unleash on so many. In response, we have seen people and communities in every nation respond with extraordinary courage and tenacity, seeking to ensure that the damage the pandemic wreaks is contained and that we are able to build our societies and economies back stronger for the future. Here in Australia, civil society organisations led the way in that effort. Whether it was opening food service centres, innovating to ensure that services continued to be delivered, checking in on elderly neighbours or devising programs to vaccinate the vulnerable, we have witnessed fantastic creativity and the true spirit of community. It has been inspiring for our research team to hear these stories and to document them for posterity.

Civil society organisations also, however, struggled at times, as we all did. The demands of moving to new ways of working, the difficulties of staying in touch with all communities, and the pressures of dramatically increased expectations on leaders and advocates, all weighed heavy on those working across the sector. At many times during this research process, we have spoken with people who have been working harder than at any point in their career and often still felt that they were not achieving what they wished to on behalf of those that they sought to serve.

We have heard too of the new ideas that bubbled to the surface at this time. Throughout this report, we have presented potential changes to the way in which civil society organisations work and to the supports that civil society receives from government and philanthropy. All of those ideas originated in the sector itself, often in the rare moments of reflection that civil society leaders found among the chaos and demands of the pandemic. In what has gone before, we have set out those specific lessons for each of our capability areas. We have presented, that is, new ideas for leadership; community connection; networks and systems; and advocacy. Each of those, we believe, is important and we hope very much that they will stimulate debate across civil society. In the next year of our project, we shall seek feedback on each of them from across Australia, before drawing them together again for our final report.

In addition, to these specific suggestions, we wish also to set out a final series of overall recommendations that we hope those who work in and care for Australian civil society will consider in the year ahead. They are laid out below:

Implications for civil society organisations

(1) **Organisations should develop or renew their strategies and plans to deepen collaborations and share power with communities beyond the organisation itself**. Throughout our research we heard again and again how the strongest and most resilient organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic were those who had the deepest ties to those they were set up to serve or represent. Organisations which struggled were often those who had looser relationships, especially those that were focussing on direct service provision and little else. We propose here that each organisation take some time after the pandemic to reflect on strategies which would enable them to deepen their community connection, in order to be able to sustain themselves with greater ease in the next inevitable moment of crisis.

(2) **Larger organisations should consider how to share power and resources to create opportunities and platforms for smaller organisations and communities.** Again, throughout the research we heard civil society leaders and practitioners speak passionately about the advantages of building strong systems and networks across the sector. We also heard it said, however, that the imbalance in power, influence and resources often makes this kind of network connection difficult. We therefore encourage the sector as a whole to consider how

there can be greater sharing of expertise and resources, and a deeper sense of partnership and collaboration between larger and smaller organisations. Internal strategy or reflection sessions within larger organisations would be a good place for this work to begin.

Implications for legislators and policy makers

(3) **Encourage advocacy and constructive criticism from across civil society.** Some of the most creative and inspiring moments during the pandemic came in the early months when government, both federally and in the states, listened carefully to the concerns of civil society organisations and innovated accordingly. Bold and new policies, including the creation of the job retention program JobKeeper, the up-tick in income support payments, including JobSeeker, and radical and far-reaching support for childcare, followed. We therefore encourage government at all levels to continue to engage with civil society organisations during the next stage of the pandemic and beyond. This should include being willing to encourage civil society organisations to advocate strongly and with passion in public where there are honest and important disagreements between them and the government.

(4) **Devolve strategic decision-making to local communities.** The analysis of the effectiveness of civil society activity during the pandemic presented in this report lends further to support to the idea that interventions in support of disadvantaged communities are best led by those either from those communities themselves or in close and direct relationship with them. This was powerfully seen in the example of the First Nations response to the pandemic in its early months and in the discussion of the debacles in the Melbourne Towers. We believe, therefore, that this should encourage government at all levels to continue to deepen its work in direct partnership with communities, delegating authority and decision-making to them wherever it is practicable to do so.

Implications for philanthropists and other funders

(5) **Increase funding for intermediaries and hubs.** The civil society leaders involved in this project have been unambiguous in their commitment to deepening the relationships among themselves and to maintaining strong networks and connections after COVID-19. Many have also noted that intermediary organisations and less formal hub systems make it far easier to sustain those networks. Intermediaries are able to introduce civil society organisation leaders to each other, encourage and enable them to stay in touch, sharing information, resources and influence as they do so. They can also broker relationships where they may be strained. Despite the importance of this work, however, relatively few philanthropic foundations have designated funding for intermediaries or hubs of this kind. The evidence presented here suggests that such funding would be warmly welcomed in the sector and could play a vital role in enhancing civil society capability.

(6) **Increase funding for organisational collaboration and relationship building.** In addition to the institutional support offered by intermediaries and hubs, civil society organisations often invest in developing cultures of collaboration and the relationship skills of their staff and leadership. The experience of COVID-19 demonstrated the exceptional importance of this work, with each of our four capability areas – leadership, community connection, networks and advocacy – being strengthened when organisations were able to collaborate effectively and create deep and sustained relationships with multiple and diverse others. Despite this, however, there is again relatively little philanthropic funding available at present to support this work and to introduce Australian civil society organisations to best practice internationally. On the basis of our research, therefore, we would encourage Australian philanthropic foundations to invest more heavily in the skills required to maintain and deepen relationships across time and place.

Notes

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About Strengthening Australian Civil Society

Strengthening Australian Civil Society is a bold new initiative which aims to build a stronger and reenergised Australian civil society. By capturing and sharing Australian and international insights, stories and strategies we support civil society to become a powerful engine of creativity, connection, knowledge and innovation grounded in everyday lived experience.

This initiative emerged from a strategic partnership between the Sydney Policy Lab and the Paul Ramsay Foundation. It is powered by a collaborative team of researchers based at the Sydney Policy Lab and an Advisory Panel of community and civil society leaders from across Australia, led by the Lab's Director, Professor Marc Stears.

Advisory Panel: Anandini Sathiananathan, Anita Tang, Devett Kennedy, Edwina MacDonald, Jason Glanville, Dame Julie Unwin OBE, Liz Skelton, Maha Abdo OAM and Tara Day-Williams

We welcome contributions, critiques and ideas for potential collaborations from across civil society and beyond.

Download and read the full report via the Sydney Policy Lab website

STRENGTHENING AUSTRALIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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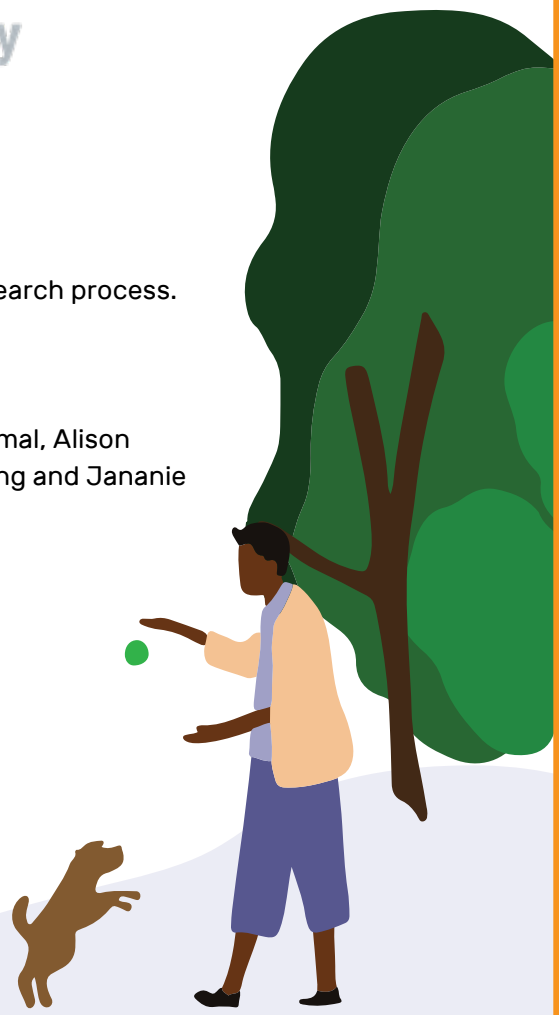
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