The challenges of leadership in grassroots social-change organizations (SCOs) are daunting: the task is large, but funding is limited and uneven, and there is often a tension between financial stability and mission accomplishment. In addition, the aim of serving and empowering excluded groups requires leadership that is not only skilled in a technical sense, but is reflective of and open to the diversity of people and perspectives that exist within the community of service. Finally, if the work of social change is to continue and progress, there must be ongoing development of new leaders. How do grassroots social-change organizations manage to address these multiple demands?

This paper draws on data from a study of grassroots social-change organizations in which understanding leadership and leadership transition were motivating research problems. Following a brief description of our research methods, we begin the substantive discussion with a definition of the requirements of leadership as reported by those working at different levels in SCOs. We summarize the current leaders’ assessments of their own strengths and weaknesses, and the paths to the positions of formal leadership in these kinds of organizations. We turn next to the uneven work of leadership development that goes on in SCOs, the processes of succession, and the structural barriers to broadening and diversifying participation in leadership. We conclude the discussion of findings by examining the benefits and challenges posed by the close link between leadership and mission in SCOs. The paper ends by highlighting particular features of the leadership challenge facing these organizations and suggests recommendations for strengthening leadership development within this context.
THE ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR LEADERS

Data for this analysis are drawn from an exploratory study of small social-change organizations that is part of a larger project focused on practical work with such groups.¹ We define a social-change organization as one working intentionally to promote changes that increase the power of disadvantaged groups, communities, or interests. Contrary to implicit assumptions in some of the literature on social-change nonprofits, not all organizations that work for such change are “movement” organizations in the sense that they locate themselves in a larger network of change agents—indeed, it is a point of interest in our study that many of our sample organizations do not.

We identified possible candidates for the study by collecting suggestions from people in the field, and then we screened the list against a set of criteria relevant to our research concerns. In keeping with our definition of an SCO, we selected groups that had a progressive rather than conservative orientation, and whose mission statement included a reference to seeking systemic change—even if much of the work entailed the delivery of direct services to individuals. Our sample of organizations (hereafter referred to as our “study organizations”) came from urban areas in the northeastern United States and consisted of relatively small agencies, with staffs of at least five people and no more than fifty, and annual budgets between $77,000 and $3,300,000. (Not all staff members were paid.) Structures varied from traditional bureaucratic forms to hierarchies with leadership circles, and staff collectives.

We generally sought organizations of varying ages, but with enough history for some evidence of performance to exist. They ranged from one very well-established group that had existed for 111 years and seen multiple generations of leaders, to two that were founded relatively recently by entrepreneurial young people. Six organizations were between 5 and 10 years old, ten were over 10 years old, and the median age was 17.5 years.

We wanted representation of the three major categories of service, advocacy, and organizing groups (a typology familiar to those that work in this field), and we recruited roughly equal numbers of organizations in each category (see Table 1 for a list of study organizations identified by pseudonym).² This typology captures the primary orientation of an agency—how it spends most of its resources, and often its self-image. Although the literature often draws a distinction only between service and advocacy organizations,³ we believe it is important to distinguish organizing groups as a third category. We define the categories as follows: service delivery refers to the provision of services directly to disadvantaged individuals and families; advocacy means promoting change on behalf of disadvantaged groups through the courts, the legislature, administrative agencies, and/or the public at large (and also includes serving other groups that do this work); and organizing means bringing together people in a constituent community and training them to advocate for themselves, with the target of advocacy efforts being either political decision makers or the public. Our categorization is not meant to suggest that these organizations are pure types with no overlaps in activities—organizing groups may provide services, service groups may advocate—rather, it reflects our understanding of their primary orientation.

We also sought variation in the field of activity. The work of the study organizations encompassed a tremendous range of activities, such as community organizing to create affordable housing in neglected urban neighborhoods; organizing to secure economic rights such as minimum wage claims; supporting transitions for women leaving abusive relationships; publishing a multilingual newspaper that gives voice and advice to low-income women and children; training young people to work against violence and advocate for change in their schools and neighborhoods; supporting self-determination in poor neighborhoods by developing indigenous leadership and decision-making skills; providing technical assistance
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>BASIC ACTIVITIES AND GOALS</th>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocates for the People (AP)</td>
<td>Political action, research, and networking to achieve full participation for the Latino population</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Critical Information (CCI)</td>
<td>Opposition research and analysis, in support of the work of progressive groups and individuals</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights for All (RFA)</td>
<td>Legal representation and organizing of socio-economically marginalized groups</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Watch (UW)</td>
<td>Local-issue research and analysis to serve social-justice activists and policymakers</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Choices (CC)</td>
<td>Citizen education, training, networking, and litigation to address environmental inequalities and sustainability</td>
<td>advocacy/organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Voice (CV)</td>
<td>Community organizing and legal representation of economically marginalized neighborhoods</td>
<td>advocacy/organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Ownership Program (COP)</td>
<td>Development of cooperatively owned and managed housing for low-income people</td>
<td>organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith in Change (FC)</td>
<td>Organizing and education of local residents for more effective political participation and effective advocacy</td>
<td>organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect (Rt)</td>
<td>Self-organizing and education for the empowerment of low-income persons</td>
<td>organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents Making Change (RMC)</td>
<td>Supporting community decision-making and control of development in diverse, low-income neighborhood</td>
<td>organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniting Youth for Change (UYC)</td>
<td>Organizing and training inner-city youth to develop stronger schools and communities</td>
<td>organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dare to Dream (DTD)</td>
<td>Provides services and support to homeless and other low-income families in a way that promotes their movement out of poverty; also advocates for policy change</td>
<td>service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Roots (GR)</td>
<td>Provides services to support the development of Black and Latino youth in poor neighborhoods</td>
<td>service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Reach (NR)</td>
<td>Supports stabilization of at-risk individuals and groups, nurtures community, brings together economically diverse segments of the population</td>
<td>service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltering Our Own (SOO)</td>
<td>Provides services to particular racial/ethnic group for advocacy and education for changing attitudes</td>
<td>service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Tools (TT)</td>
<td>Anti-violence training for youth, in service of safer, more democratic schools/culture</td>
<td>service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and network linkages to residents seeking to influence environmental policy; and litigating to secure the just treatment of psychiatrically disabled prisoners, abandoned LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered) youth, sex workers, and other marginalized populations.

Finally, we wanted diversity among organizational leaders—by sex, race or ethnicity, and age. Our selection of organizations was shaped in part by the desire to understand how these different factors might affect styles of leadership. In our work with practitioners, we had heard social-change activists across the country express concerns with leadership transition challenges and with generational tensions in social-change organizations. To investigate the ways in which leadership might vary by generation, or how the process of leadership development and succession might be affected by age differences, we sought to speak with leaders of different generations. In addition, we conducted interviews with staff members—primarily young people—in the same organizations, who could give us the perspective of potential leaders. The final sample of organizations included eight led by older leaders (ages 45-69), seven led by younger leaders (ages 27 to 41, with all but one under 40), and one collective in which we spoke with both an older and a younger activist.

Data were gathered primarily from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with organizational leaders and staff members. We supplemented interview data by reviewing informational tax returns (Form 990s), organizational literature, and media or research accounts. In each organization, we interviewed formal leaders (19 in all, some of whom were co-directors or collective members), and one or more staff members. As shown in Table 2, the respondents were quite diverse: overall, 54% were people of color and 54% women. Among leaders, about half were younger and half older, with the greatest racial diversity in the younger group. If the two collective members are included among leaders, just under half the group is female. Among staff members, 16 out of 19 (84%) were younger; over 60% of staff members were people of color and a comparable proportion were female.

Interviews were conducted by project staff members (three women, two of whom are women of color), using a set of open-ended questions to guide the conversation. Leadership-related topics raised with both leaders and staff members included the following (with only slight variation according to the respondent’s position in the organization):

- qualities of effective leaders for this type of organization
- the respondent’s own strengths and weaknesses as a leader (or potential leader)
- how the respondent developed his or her own skills, whether training has been adequate, and the role of formal education in this process
- the roles, if any, of gender and race in organizational leadership and decision making

The interviews ran between 50 and 180 minutes in length, and they were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. The analysis entailed iterative coding of interview texts. At the outset, all transcripts were reviewed and coded for themes identified either in advance or emerging from the data; in subsequent analysis, themes were added or aggregated, and transcripts re-coded. Coded segments of text were reviewed for the whole set of transcripts, but also broken down by various factors, including organizational and respondent characteristics. For example, we paid special attention to how leaders’ responses varied according to age group, sex, or race; how responses varied by the respondent’s position (director versus staff member); and how organizational approaches to leadership development varied by organizational structure or other features. In some cases, comparative analyses produced interesting differences, and in other cases it did not. Where differences or similarities were particularly striking or relevant, we note them below.
### TABLE 2  RESPONDENT CATEGORIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT CATEGORIES</th>
<th>NUMBER IN CATEGORY</th>
<th>PEOPLE OF COLOR</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>older a,b</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>younger a,c</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Members of collectives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>older</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>younger</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>older</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>younger</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Board members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>older</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total respondents by category</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leaders/collective members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff members</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Board members</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Age ranges were as follows: older respondents, 45-69; younger respondents, 21-42 (all but two of the younger respondents were below age 40).

b Included among the older directors were two women of color from the same organization, one of whom was just retiring and the other of whom was just starting, at the time of our interviews.

c Among the younger directors were four young entrepreneurs who had started or re-created organizations they were now heading (one of which was led by a team of two leaders).
LEADERSHIP REQUIREMENTS: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LEAD A SOCIAL-CHANGE ORGANIZATION?

Based on the nonprofit leadership literature, we would expect the work of formal leaders in social-change organizations to include three general areas of responsibility: providing a sense of direction for the organization (usually in conjunction with the board), interacting with the environment to secure support and ensure the relevance of services or products, and overseeing internal operations in line with the agency’s mission. These areas obviously overlap; for example, an effective vision or direction cannot be independent of the environment, and a large part of internal operations management entails staff motivation, which is clearly related to mission.

When we asked directors and staff members what it took to lead an organization like theirs, they offered strikingly similar lists of qualities. Their responses related to all three of the areas just mentioned, but most heavily emphasized direction setting and internal management (specifically of people), usually reporting these as closely linked. About a third of all the comments offered by both types of respondents (most of whom gave multiple responses to the question) alluded to the leader’s need for vision fueled by a conviction that would help to move the organization in that direction.

GUIDING WITH SHARED VISION

Directors most commonly expressed this quality in terms of a commitment to a mission, the ability to “see ideas through,” the motivation to “push forward,” and sometimes “risk taking” or “creativity.” Interestingly, it was the staff members who more often explicitly spoke of “vision.” As a young program coordinator at Advocates for the People put it, effective leaders are “people who can move things, who have a broader vision than tomorrow, you know—not just ‘in the next four hours, what are we going to do.’ Someone that, yeah, someone that can manage a situation, using that vision as their guide. …”

A program director at Uniting Youth for Change listed several qualities, then added, “And vision. It’s hard to lead any of us without being able to see the world being a better place, whether the outcomes happen or not. …I think you have to have a certain level of intensity in situations to be able to drive forward when things get difficult, be able to look at a situation that happens at school or in a community, and be able to feel it intensely, and then figure out what to do with it.”

Both staff members and directors alluded to the work of social change in talking about leader vision and commitment, noting the importance of “knowing who you’re trying to help” as one staffer said, or “having a deep and consistent commitment to social change,” as a director put it. When the director of Neighborhood Reach was asked about effective leadership, she immediately thought of someone whose “grounding in what democracy really means made her a very, very effective leader of [her] organization.” Another example that occurred to her was someone else whose “feet are very firmly on the ground of justice or what is right. And I think that’s essential for leadership.”

However this idea of leadership connected to mission was expressed, the notion articulated by both directors and staff members was not that of an independent, forceful visionary; it was of someone who understood his or her dependence on others...
a vision in partnership with others. The response of a young staff member at Growing Roots is typical: “I think that they [leaders] have to be able to look at the big picture and also short term goals and be able to make sure that their short term goals will lead up to that huge vision that they have. They have to see other people helping them get to that point, and they have to be open.” A young staffer at Sheltering Our Own explained that the first thing a leader needed was

a vision .... a dream initially of what you want, what you see the organization as. Then you need someone who’s willing to take actions, who’s willing to take initiative, who’s willing to do what it takes to get it there. But also consider everyone’s opinions. So you need someone who’s going to take action yet consult anyone or is willing to take advice from people, is willing to ask questions, is willing to go up to someone and learn from what they’ve experienced. So you don’t want someone who’s just, you know, obsessed with their own thoughts and their own ideas. You want someone who’s accepting of other beliefs as well...I guess you just need a dreamer, a thinker and a doer.

The director of Residents Making Change, an organization controlled by the community, identified the need for a leader to “articulate vision” but described this process as entailing considerable interaction:

And when I say articulate vision, articulate the vision of the people that they’re leading or whatever [group] they’re leading. And allow that to be bigger than them.... Even if you’re constructing it, allowing it to be bigger than you and then testing it and letting people sort of always be interactive, and always letting people ...or the world around you justify what you’re saying, whatever theory you might have.... It’s figuring out what their visions are and then bringing them in, being able to articulate it, sell it, move it forward, share it.... The other thing is ...leaders always need to be able to understand, stay true to, and move within the values of who and what they’re leading, [be] consistent [with these], and not diverge from [them] when it’s convenient....

RELATIONAL PRACTICE

In addition to citing the need for collaboration in direction setting, directors and staff members spoke at length about relational skills as an essential part of leadership in their organizations. Not surprisingly, there was some overlap but also variation in perspective reflected in the comments of the two groups. Both staff members and directors spoke of the need to listen—to heed others, to be open to their ideas, to be willing to learn from them. “You have to be open also to learning new things and to recognizing that everybody’s got something to teach,” said a co-director of Growing Roots. “Experts as we are, we’re always learning new things.” Where comments of directors and staff members differed slightly was in the way they spoke of leader-staff relationships, and the qualities they chose to highlight: their emphases reflected the perspectives associated with their different positions in the organization.

Directors often spoke of the leader’s role in motivating, inspiring, and supporting staff members; providing a “scaffolding” for their work; and helping them expand their vision and see connections between their work and the mission of the organization; as well as overseeing their work in a way that supported their growth. “I think first of all an effective leader is somebody who is committed to creating an environment where people really can identify [with] and own the mission, where everybody feels that their voice is important,” said the director of Dare to Dream. The co-director of Growing Roots explained, “You
have to be good with people somehow. You really have to find a way to help people be inspired and help them to learn and to grow.” The new director of Neighborhood Reach was particularly eloquent in elaborating this feature of leadership:

…I think that it really is important when you’re in a position of leadership like mine, that you are ever mindful that you are providing some kind of staging for your staff to do their best work and that I see myself as their champion, to really help them to excel in what it is they want to accomplish in their work. And I really spend a lot of time trying to inspire people to understand the possibilities of what they can accomplish.... And also ...to keep the people inspired in their work in view of the challenges—I won’t say in spite of the challenges, but in view of the challenges. I think it’s very important to keep people mindful of the fact that doing this work sometimes takes a lot of really baby steps, and that it’s very important to continue to remind people of the progress that they’ve made and to keep them challenged in the miles that they have yet to go.

Linked to these discussions of staff relations were comments about decision-making: how it must be transparent, clear, fair, and consistent (themes echoed in some staff comments). A personal attribute cited by several directors as characteristic of effective leadership was enough confidence or security not to need to be in control or to have power. “I don’t have to exercise power in order to establish myself,” as the founder of Center for Critical Information (CCI) put it. The director of another agency alluded to the lessons of Chinese history as she elaborated this idea:

And also ...when you feel secure, you know you can do a lot of things. And I feel all of [the] leaders in the past, sometimes they failed because they were very insecure. When they’re very insecure, they were not willing to listen to other people’s input....They were just cloning themselves, and I think that’s part of the problem. As a matter of fact ...when I was in Hong Kong, I...[had] to study a lot of history, Chinese history and Western history, European history. And when we study history, we have to study the characteristics of the Emperor, the King. And when we studied that...we found out in general when a successful king, when the Golden Years...[were] gone, [he] came to end of his power [it was] usually because his characteristic changed because he became very insecure. He became very jealous. He was afraid of...[people] taking away the power. ...They failed to listen to the right thing. They failed to judge reasonably, and that’s how they failed.

Where directors emphasized providing support along with power sharing or collaboration, staffers themselves were somewhat more likely to describe an effective leader in terms of respectful treatment of others. As an older staff member at Sheltering Our Own (SOO) said, an effective leader, “as a fellow worker, they need to respect each other, to treat everyone as an individual, [to recognize] that...each one’s suggestion and idea is valuable to the organization.” The contrast in language and framing was particularly marked in responses offered by the director and a program manager from Rights for All. When asked what it takes to be an effective leader in this type of organization, the director said, “Lack of sense of control. I think too many executive directors and too many supervisors have too much of a need to control others.” The program manager’s first response was, “I think that a willingness to respect other people, other people’s views—a recognition that it’s a team and that we strive towards consensus based decision making.” In a sense, they are talking about the same thing, but their perspectives and framing are different in ways consistent with their positions.

Maria, a young program coordinator at Advocates for the People, explained effective leadership by
describing her director’s treatment of her, which included giving her opportunities to develop but also treating her, in a sense, as an “equal.”

...I think an effective manager knows how to get along with the staff and have the staff trust them, you know, and...give people recognition...I can tell when Antonio trusts me on certain things, because he’ll give up his—like if somebody calls and says, you know, ‘we have a conference we want you to speak [at]’...he goes, ‘well ...you know, Maria’s really the one who’s been doing this and you should talk to her.’ And...I’m going, you know, man, he didn’t have to do that. He could’ve just juiced me for the information and he could have run with it....But he’s about developing leadership, so I think a good leader is not scared of putting anybody else in a, in an equal position as him or teaching them everything or showing all their cards, you know, because you confide in that person and...you’re developing other people. It’s not just about you or—and other people share your vision, because you brought people into that vision. That vision wasn’t just created by you, but developed by you and other people. And I think that’s what—I mean, I’ll tell you the truth. I think that’s really why I consider Antonio to be one of the most effective managers....He thinks about me and my thing and thinks about Nereyda and her thing and Paulina and her thing, you know, and Tina and her thing, and he respects everybody for why they’re good at what it is that they do.

ADMINISTRATION AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS: UNIMPORTANT OR UNRECOGNIZED?

Directors and staff members made relatively little reference to leadership skills relating to other aspects of internal management and—somewhat surprisingly, at least for directors—in frequent reference to environmental relations. On the first point, it may be that administrative and operational responsibilities aside from staff management are seen as less associated with “leadership” than are the qualities more frequently identified. One director, the head of Community Ownership Program (COP), did draw this distinction, responding to the question about effective leadership by saying “there’s leadership and there’s management” and identifying the two functions with different qualities and responsibilities. This director didn’t seem to be elevating one function over the other, but some kind of evaluative distinction between leadership and administration may have been implicit in the thinking of at least some directors, particularly those who were quick to point out their own weaknesses in the “administrative” domain. In fact, three of the organizations had employed someone specifically as a central administrator to assist the director by taking on these tasks. At Dare to Dream, the administrator described her role by saying the director “is an incredible visionary and she is a big idea person and a big thinker, but she is not a detail person at all. And she knows that and she will own it. And...I never thought of myself as a detail person, but compared to her, I sure as heck am....So she has relied on me a lot for the operational type of activities around here.”

Reasons for the lack of emphasis on environmental relations in descriptions of leadership are less clear. It may be unsurprising that staff members don’t say much about this area, given their own generally internal orientation (one program manager did mention external relations as a function of leadership), but directors were not much more likely than staffers to highlight this area. One possible explanation is that in talking about the mission-driving/direction-setting function, they assumed implicitly an external orientation as an integral part of this role. The handful of directors who did make explicit reference to external relations talked about relationship building, networking, collaboration or partnerships, maintaining legitimacy with funders, and the usefulness of having access to political resources.
CURRENT LEADERS’ OWN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

After being asked to talk about leadership more generally—which often produced a discussion of the director’s own role—directors were asked what they thought were their own specific strengths and weaknesses. Overall, they identified far more strengths than weaknesses, and the area of strength most commonly noted had to do with commitment to or skill in the agency’s mission-related work. There was a gender difference, however, in that men were more likely than women to identify strengths in this area, whereas women were more likely than men to identify relational skills (especially white women) and personal attributes such as a sense of humor or confidence (especially women of color).

Among the weaknesses that directors identified, the largest number were relational, falling primarily into the areas of impatience/expecting too much/giving too little praise and wanting to be liked/reluctance to make hard personnel decisions. Men were more likely than women to name relational weaknesses. About a third of the weakness comments related to personal attributes—sometimes work habits—of varying sorts, more commonly mentioned by women than men. Only a few comments concerned mission-relevant, work-related weaknesses, such as not enjoying political games, not having enough of a public presence, or being a poor administrator.

THE PATHS AND PREPARATION OF CURRENT LEADERS

The paths to leadership taken by the current directors of these particular organizations were primarily shaped by personal vision and initiative, as fully half (eight) of the current leaders of these organizations came to their positions through founding, co-founding, or transforming the organization (this number includes both older and younger leaders). Three directors (19%) were hired from outside their organizations (in two cases, the incoming director was known to the founder); two (12.5%) were promoted from within the organization, and one other was hired from outside but had previously worked extensively within the organization. The remaining two organizations were led by, in one case, an individual who was placed in the position by a national parent organization and in the other by a collective of individuals coming to the work through personal connections. In other words, very few of the directors were the product of internal leadership development efforts within the organizations themselves.

In terms of how current leaders developed their capacity for these positions, there were some common themes but also differences, in particular by age. First, although none of the directors had formal education in management, about half made reference to college, professional, or technical education as relevant to their work. Mentors and role models were cited by about a third of each group. Similar proportions mentioned having had the opportunity to develop or manage a program previously, often with some kind of mentorship.

Age or generational differences appeared in three areas. Two (one-fourth) of the younger leaders had developed skills in business, whereas none of the older leaders reported doing so. A second difference was in the “learning by doing” reported by the two groups. Both younger and older leaders said their leadership skill development was partly a matter of trial and error, but younger leaders were more likely to report learning with others, either through co-leader arrangements or by relying on feedback from subordinates. For example, the young founder of Teaching Tools had limited experience being supervised, so
he said, “I haven’t learned how to manage from being managed. I’ve learned how to manage from the people that I’ve managed—if that all makes sense—which makes me an incredibly responsive manager because that’s how I’ve learned what success looks like, is feedback from people.” When the director of Urban Watch moved up from her previous position in the organization, she found that she needed to change some of the attitudes and perspectives that had served her well in a narrower role, and the way she did it was by listening to co-worker subordinates. Sometimes her behavior would so irritate one of them that he would “scream at me coming out of meetings.” She figured out that she needed “to be open and to listen to people giving me advice because I needed a ton of advice at that point and that meant getting advice from all of my staff. . . .”

By contrast, though older directors may have had mentors or role models, when they spoke of learning by doing, they usually described a more independent activity. “You don’t get a set of instructions with a nonprofit,” said the longtime leader of COP. “You just start one. No one tells you how to run it or how to do it and how to do the budget and how to do this, and you just sort of make it up as you go along. And you’re doubly cursed I guess, in a way. You’ve got to make up what you’re supposed to do, and then you have to have the skills to know how to do it.” He mentioned learning some administrative lessons from an early bookkeeper in the organization, but he didn’t describe having developed as a manager with anyone’s assistance.

Part of the difference in stories may be that younger leaders are still engaged in the learning process and may be more conscious of how much they rely on others; another explanation may be generational differences in approaches to work (younger people are said to be more team-oriented). Still another important explanation may be that the older leaders drew their peer support more broadly from the social and political environment in which they were founding or otherwise coming to lead organizations than from immediate co-workers or co-leaders. So where young directors were much more likely to speak of learning along with others, older directors were more likely than younger ones to reference the social movements and political climate in and by which they were educated. For example, when asked about her development as an organizational leader, the 54-year-old director of CCI replied,

I’m part of a generation who did not have any training whatsoever, and so I bet that that profile I painted of a poor administrator who had the original vision for the organization, that was so true of so many organizations that started around the late ’70s and early ’80s. We didn’t have any training at all. But we had a very exciting and volatile political atmosphere where change was an everyday occurrence, and your frustration came because change wasn’t fast enough, not because you were losing everything. So I don’t give us any particular credit. I think we were all born of the political climate at the time, when there was so much possibility and so much excitement.

Two types of learning are implied by the directors’ descriptions of their own development. One is the acquisition of specific skills or knowledge sets relating either to the work the organization does or the broader tasks of leadership, and the other is the development of an attitude of comfort with the position—a sense of efficacy, optimism, and self-confidence—along with a commitment to social responsibility. The political experience alluded to by older directors may not have provided managerial skills, but it did contribute to a vision of change and undoubtedly also supported the sense of possibility that leadership requires. The references to learning from social movement by older directors probably attest to the importance of these personal kinds of development.
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN SOCIAL-CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS

Leadership entails elements of skill and identity, both of which are developed through situated practice. Essential components of this experiential learning process (beyond basic instruction) are engagement in practice, feedback, and support. One way to assess the potential for leadership development in our grassroots social-change organizations is to examine the extent to which these conditions are present for staff members.

“The opportunities for leadership development are limited by two factors: first, not all staff members are given significant responsibility and second, insufficient attention is paid to coaching or mentoring in several organizations.”

In general, two types of practice are potentially available to staff members: participation in general organizational decision-making and responsibility for specific program activities (including the development and running of programs). The latter is arguably the more powerful learning opportunity because it includes more valuable feedback: a program director will usually know when something is or is not working even in the absence of significant mentoring or coaching. General participation in decisions, however—including the entirely shared decision-making of collective structures—does not necessarily afford participants useful feedback because they don’t see the results of their own decisions. Some kind of appropriate feedback mechanisms must be part of the design for this type of practice to be useful for learning. The third critical element, support, is not necessarily present in either of these opportunities for practice unless there is explicit coaching or mentoring.

Although some element of practice is available to staff members in virtually all of these organizations, the opportunities for leadership development are limited by two factors: first, not all staff members are given significant responsibility and second, insufficient attention is paid to coaching or mentoring in several organizations. Active coaching plus opportunities for practice seem to be present in under half of our organizations, and the extension of these leadership-development elements to most staff members is even less common, probably characteristic of only a handful of the organizations. Access to practice with coaching for a limited number of staff members (e.g., program directors) can be found in organizations with all types of structures, but the extension of opportunities to broader segments of the staff is primarily found in those organizations with more democratic structures and responsiveness to the community. In part, this may be because such agencies see their missions as specifically including empowerment and they apply this aim internally as well as externally. As a co-director of Growing Roots explained, “I think in the beginning it was really us having much more of a role in developing that program and now I see us really supporting our staff to develop programs. And also to have kids [clients] come up within the program.”

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

One clear sign of leadership development opportunities in an organization would be the accession to a director’s position by people inside the organization. As noted earlier, however, this is relatively unusual—only two of these organizations had leadership promoted from within, and a third had a leader who had previously worked with the organization. But there are many reasons why several of these organizations would be unlikely to have developed internal leadership tracks, including the fact that a number of them are relatively young organizations headed by a founder, and the reality that not all staff members (even if inclined toward leadership) are anxious to lead the organization in which they’re currently working.
Only one of the sixteen younger staff members interviewed expressed a clear desire to be the executive director of the agency at some point, and one other said she had thought about it, but with some doubts about the fit. Two of the younger staffers said they would not be interested in this position; one because she wanted to work in a more directly activist organization at this point in her life, and another because he felt there was too much “baggage” in the organization’s existing staff structure. Two more spoke of developing leadership skills in their current organizations, but they also had dreams of starting their own organizations in program areas closer to their own interests. And another saw opportunity for her own growth in the agency; even expected she could develop a program, but also might want eventually to do her own thing. The interviewer asked her, “And when you think of the future, what do you think of your role in the agency?” She responded:  

*My role. I think already, I mean I was an advocate and I’m trained in PR, marketing, and journalism, so I’m definitely happy in this outreach position for now. But I definitely, I mean I don’t want to be doing outreach coordination. I want to, but in a different capacity as well and I think as the organization grows, I think there’ll be a stage where there’s more positions opening up, where I can kind of expand my own growth in the agency.*

She was asked where she would like to be in two or three years.  

*In two years? I think I want to see myself, I’ve always wanted to have, well, I guess I’ve really wanted to have my own organization pertaining to …women [of my community]. So I think to start with, say two years from now, I want to see myself playing a major role getting that …[particular] project together and kind of spearheading the whole thing, I guess, using my network already and this agency to kind of put that together for …[those] advocates.*

The interviewer followed up by asking how the current job fit into the larger trajectory of her work life.  

*I think just the whole experience of working in an …[ethnic] women’s organization. I definitely need that for whatever I do just to learn from, I mean just to observe what Madeleine’s doing at her position, what everyone else is doing at their position, how this organization’s being run. I’m definitely taking this job as a learning process for myself.*

Referring to the respondent’s desire to run her own agency, the interviewer asked her what sort of training she thought she would need for that.  

*I think it would be more through observing. More through learning from what people have done in the past, the mistakes they’ve made in the past. And then, I mean, the other half of it would just be learning on my own once I do run that agency. Learning from the mistakes that I am sure I’m going to make. So I think it just needs an observing process. And in terms of training, I think this job is training enough. I think more years over here would be enough for me to start off on my own.*

To the extent that this young woman’s comments are more broadly representative of young staff members, it may be that in terms of providing leadership development to younger people, the need is more for consistent participation opportunities and support than for organizations to offer an internal track to their own executive director’s position.
Structural Barriers to Broadening Leadership

Some of our respondents as well as others familiar with the field of social change have expressed concerns both about whether there are enough young leaders to take up the work of the retiring baby-boom generation and about how to ensure that social-change leadership includes diversity by race, ethnicity, sex, and other dimensions of social identity. Though the situation may not be as dire as some have feared, our interviewees did highlight some important structural barriers to broadening leadership in these organizations, even when there is a desire to do so.

Antonio Mena of Advocates for the People complained that he was “kind of stuck,” partly because “you just can’t hire somebody for this kind of job.” He saw the need for new leadership, but he felt himself spread too thin to do both the necessary training of younger people and the work itself. There were limited opportunities for staff mobility (“the organization’s not large enough to have any upward mobility unless I drop dead”), leading to somewhat high turnover among the staff, which in turn increased his own training burden. At the same time, he didn’t have access to the resources needed to hire more senior people who could share the responsibility. It could be particularly difficult to recruit qualified Latinos for skilled work at low pay: there was a “pool of whites who can take pay cuts, who can take low salaries” but “in terms of Latinos, what we find is that there’s such an economic polarization in the community that you have people that are very, very poor who can’t even—are aren’t even eligible for these jobs…and then you have people who are credentialed, who have—they’re going to make a certain amount of money.” In addition, there were generational trends away from social-change work and toward the private sector, he said, but “I’m beginning to see a shift a little bit in that thinking.”

The net result was that he didn’t have staff members with as much experience as he would like, though he did see the potential in his young subordinates. “[T]hey’re all kind of leaders in different ways,” he said. “[B]asically these are people who are running their own areas but have a ways to go yet.” With more resources he could hire additional senior people for a better “mix”; with more institutional opportunities, they could go farther.

Mena’s leadership development was focused on young people from the Latino community who had some basic skills but needed more experience and guidance. For organizations that might try to develop leadership among the most disadvantaged, the barriers were even greater. The director of Community Choices said those in the organization had a vision of future leadership coming up from the community, but that it would take five to ten years, not one, to develop such leadership. The co-founder of Community Voice said that with “experience and...some sort of nurturing or apprenticeship...people could do a lot of what I do.” But he didn’t agree with some in the field who would argue that in community organizing, the aim is to “work yourself out of a job.”

… I don’t think that it’s realistic in some ways. I think that I can work myself out of a lot of aspects of my job and I think that that is really important, to be focused on having people developing the skills and leadership, to be pushing things forward. I do think the fact that I went to school for about 25 years in this country means that I’m going to be more comfortable writing in English than people who didn’t. And I think that given the way foundations decide who to give money to, I think it makes sense for me to write grant proposals, and think it’s an organization boon to do it. There are some foundations that are brave and will let people write and apply in Spanish, and you might even get really into the authenticity of it all but I think that by and large having people who are comfortable writing helps...in a lot of contexts, and I think that the amount of training we can offer to people isn’t going to fundamentally make it so that people are suddenly able to magically do everything that an organization needs to do. ...
Residents Making Change was unusually successful at developing community leadership, and indeed, its current director came from the community and developed some of his own skills as he grew up under the tutelage of older members of the organization. But he had left the neighborhood to attend an elite college, and then gained additional skills through internships and work in the private sector. It remained to be seen whether a young staff member from the community without such education and experience would be able to attain his own dream of some day becoming an executive director.

In sum, social-change organizations face a set of challenges in trying to broaden their leadership. People whose educational backgrounds or professional training might make them good candidates are not necessarily eager to work for low pay in small organizations with limited opportunities for upward movement. But people without those advantages require much more training by already busy current leaders, and in some cases no amount of development the organization can realistically offer will be enough to make up for lack of formal education or professional experience.

**Leadership and the Work of Social Change**

Social-change organizations without significant resources can nevertheless attract talented people, in large part because they offer the opportunity of doing work that is meaningful and satisfying—and this benefit can at least partially offset the disadvantage of relatively low pay. But the benefit is strongest for those in the best position to align the agency’s work with their own visions, and this usually means decision-makers, often founders. A particular hindrance to broadening or diversifying leadership in such organizations, then, has to do with the ability of the founder or other leader to balance commitment to a personal vision with openness to other views; a related challenge is resolving the possible tension between fidelity to the mission of the organization (getting its work done) and development of nontraditional leadership.

Older founder-leaders often spoke of the degree to which their position, even the organization as a whole, had formed around their vision or become heavily identified with their particular ideas and expertise. When Antonio Mena of AP said, “You just can’t hire somebody for this kind of job,” he was in part alluding to the way in which he had figured out how to do it as he went along, and “a lot of [the work] is driven by my vision.” “Basically, my biggest challenge the whole time is this, since I started the center, I’ve always had kind of the founder’s syndrome, you know...trying to figure out a way to institutionalize it so it goes beyond my personality.” He went on to talk about resource constraints, but periodic references to his own specialized role seemed to reflect also questions about how well someone else would do the particular work that he had envisioned.

The founder of Centers for Critical Information expressed similar concerns, also in somewhat indirect terms. Asked about her own role in the future of the organization, she responded:

> Well, I don’t see myself as having a long future at this point. I’m in my twentieth year at CCI. I really see myself already at the beginning of a transition to new leadership, probably, I don’t know, five years or something like that. So I see my role as making sure that during that transition the organization doesn’t lose its footing. I don’t know exactly how to put that more clearly but [that] it stays a stable, strong organization, with clear, articulated principles. I’m not wedded to preserving any particular aspects of the program, as much as I am seeing if I can oversee passing on the general political principles on which we have operated for twenty years.

The interviewer referred to the problem of stepping back while at the same time ensuring that principles remained intact, and asked the respondent to elaborate. She explained,
Well, it’s a fine line, because you do want to make sure that that [continuity] happens to some extent. On the other hand, one of the things that can go awry at this point is that the founder doesn’t let go, and builds in a kind of rigidity that becomes inappropriate and has to be dealt with by the next leader. ...I tend to worry more about making sure that the organization is open enough to accept new leadership and the changes that new leadership might bring. I worry about that.

I also worry about our losing our political principles, but it’s not as if I’m leaving this organization after five years. Twenty years allows enough time for an organization to develop an identity and um, it would—it doesn’t worry me so much that someone, that new leadership might come in with vastly different political principles. And part of me really welcomes the idea that new leadership would come in with new program ideas and new directions, and maybe even some changes in the mission.

The director’s comment reflects a clear tension between organizational openness to new ideas and faithfulness to guiding principles, a tension for which the resolution isn’t obvious. How much could a new director change, and still be true to the organization’s founding principles? The question is a difficult one under any circumstances, but particularly hard for people who have established organizations and worked tirelessly to sustain them for decades. In addition to establishing the vision or guiding principles, founders or long-term leaders also become repositories of important knowledge relating to the organization’s work. Because some of these organizations are so identified with their leaders, in some sense any change of leadership would probably by definition mean a significant change in the work of the organization, and it is understandable that a founder would be nervous about this. At the same time, change is inevitable if the work of social change is to continue. One possible way to work toward a smoother transition would be to work more consciously to bring others—particularly younger staff members—along as the organization develops, but this requires time and other resources, and there is no guarantee that those the leader brings along will stay with the organization.

If the mission of an organization is about direct empowerment and the development of capacity in others, then the conflict between doing the work and developing new talent is lessened.

A good leader is somebody who can really get the other people going, help the other people. I don’t like the word “empower” because I don’t think you can give other people their power, but I know that I’ve had people in my life who helped me realize my power and helped me access my power in a way and learn how to do that. And a good leader will let people make mistakes. A good leader will know that mistakes will happen and they need for the person to progress.

The difficulty is that it takes considerable time and effort to build other people’s capacity, and though many of the leaders we interviewed would probably agree that this is an important feature of leadership, they wouldn’t necessarily say it took priority over getting other work done. The balance between developing others and doing other work related to mission will be struck by different leaders and organizations in their own way.

“If the mission of an organization is about direct empowerment and the development of capacity in others, then the conflict between doing the work and developing new talent is lessened.”
CONCLUSION

It seems clear that leadership development is taking place in these social-change organizations, though perhaps not as systematically as it might, and there are significant challenges to broadening leadership in this field. Factors that appear to enhance the likelihood of new leadership development include personal commitment by existing leaders; a shared understanding among organizational members (staff and possibly the board as well) that organizational mission specifically includes building new leadership capacity; and size, which works differently at different levels. Small organizations can offer more participation and closer relationships for most members, but large organizations offer more positions in which staff members can experience leadership (an important past experience for most of the current leaders in these organizations).

One major challenge for leadership development in social-change organizations is the high probability that staff members (or other participants) tutored in any given organization will not go on to lead that organization. Because these agencies have such limited resources, unless they can develop staff members through the course of the work itself (without investing significant amounts of additional time in this process), it will seem unwise on an agency level to commit heavily to internal leadership development. At the same time, without such effort, valuable expertise may be lost and new leadership development may be less effective than it could have been. In some cases, organizations will disappear.

One possible option for the training of a new crop of nonprofit leaders (not only for social-change organizations, but potentially there as well) is formal professional education, as in the nonprofit management programs that are now offered by a number of postsecondary institutions. We asked directors and staff members about the value of such programs, but the responses were not particularly positive in either group. Though both groups would appreciate additional managerial skills, they were skeptical about the ability of generic programs to deliver on these, given how much even their administrative work is shaped by context. In addition, directors were particularly critical of the mainstream perspective likely to be inculcated in such programs. As Antonio Mena commented, “I find that when you deal with people who have trained in public affairs schools and stuff like that, they’ve been trained basically to work with people who have power. They don’t know sometimes how to work with communities that don’t have power, and it’s a lot different. And so the question is, can you get some people like that and untrain ‘em, retrain ‘em, you know.”

When CCI’s founder was asked if she would have found such training useful, she commented:

…I guess the reason I’m a little bit less enthusiastic about that is that with training you can’t just take what you need, you tend to be marched through a program that may or may not be relevant to what you’re doing, and you can promise that only 50 percent of it will be relevant, if that. And it can, I think, develop a kind of—I’m not sure exactly the wording I want here, but it can encourage you to think inside boxes, when a lot of the work of the program director or the founder or the visionary, or whatever that set of roles is in a social-change organization, is to think outside the box and to see possibilities where they weren’t obvious. I wouldn’t have wanted training that taught me that there was a certain way to do this work, because the likelihood that the way they taught was based on the same political principles that I and the people who were around felt were important would have been pretty, pretty slim. So I would have learned a lot of methods without the political principles that really should be guiding the methods. …I think the education I had, which was more or less liberal arts and social sciences, was as useful to me as any training would have been.
One option suggested by some of our respondents would be for formal educational programs to work directly with social-change organizations to design training that integrates service learning (some programs already do a little of this). For such an approach to be most effective, the educational institutions would have to work closely with the organizations to identify appropriate skills to be developed and a formal curriculum that would support the service-learning components. To open up the work to a diverse group of students, there would be a need for support to underwrite internships, not only for student time, but also for organizational resources to be devoted to the leadership development process.

Our interviewees identified two central functions of leadership that might be focal points for training, particularly if it involved service learning. These two areas were vision (coupled with commitment) and relational skills. Although both probably draw on personal attributes as well as learned skills, they can be strengthened in training, particularly in settings that entail actual work in organizations. Vision must be informed by an analysis of social conditions, and this analysis can be motivated and grounded through work in social-change organizations. On this point, members of Respect indicate that an indispensable element of new-member training is political education that counters internalized oppression and enables the new member to connect her experience to a larger social context. And relational skills can be developed only in the context of practice—though this calls for tutoring along with exposure to the practical challenges of working with others.

ENDNOTES

1 As part of a project funded by the Ford Foundation and entitled “Building Movement into the Nonprofit Sector,” staff members conducted meetings around the country with progressive activists who worked in or with grassroots change-oriented organizations. One topic of discussion related to how the work of these individuals and groups could be supported and developed into a larger, more integrated effort. Additional reports on this project are available at www.buildingmovement.org.

2 These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories—Minkoff (2002), for example, discusses the rise of “hybrid” service-advocacy organizational forms among identity-based groups—but most of the agencies in this study were primarily identified with one category.

3 See for example Minkoff (1994; 2002).

4 A report on generational issues is available at the project Web site listed in Note 1.

5 We discuss here the formal leaders—in most cases, the executive directors of organizations—but recognize that the exercise of “leadership” is something that can happen at any level of an organization and may at times even be stronger at lower levels. It should be noted that boards of directors also have formal authority for oversight and policy decisions in nonprofit organizations, but highly active boards are not the rule in this group of organizations and we generally do not discuss them.

6 The literature on nonprofit management includes long lists of responsibilities and functions of leaders, but they can generally be grouped into these three main areas, following a framework articulated by Moore (1995; 2000) for strategy in public and nonprofit organizations. For discussions of nonprofit leadership functions, see Young (1987), Herman & Heimovics (1994), Drucker (1992), Wolf (1999).
Names of both organizations and individual respondents are pseudonyms, and certain other identifying details have been changed. Transcript conventions include the following: ellipses indicate omitted text; comments in brackets are not the speaker’s words but are inserted to make sense of a passage.

See Fletcher (1999) for definitions and discussion of relational practice at work.

By “transforming” we mean something like taking an organization that existed in very limited form, perhaps was not even incorporated, and building it into something much more active, perhaps even very different in substance.

See Karp et al. (1999) on Generation X and teamwork.

On the last point, see Daloz (2000) on transformative learning and the development of leaders who serve the common good.

See for example Lave & Wenger (1991)’s analysis of learning as increasingly central participation in a community of practice.

We discuss organizational structure and decision-making processes in another paper.

REFERENCES


