

## Investing in Leadership

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### Young Leaders "On The Verge"

A growing number of grantmakers and nonprofit organizations are turning their attention and their resources to the development of the next generation of leaders. On The Verge, a project of the nonprofit organization On The Move, is just such a program. In 2003, long-time community organizer Leslie Medine partnered with program developer Diana Gordon and individual philanthropist Roger Jordan (then on the board of the Cricket Island Foundation) to design an innovative program that develops young leaders in predominantly low-income communities.

On The Verge initially grew out of Medine's work with Alameda, California high school students on youth-led community projects, among them the establishment of the first youth-led charter high school. Through follow-up conversations with these students a few years later to ask what they had "carried forward," Medine learned that the college experience did not provide them with the same opportunities to gain real-world experience, build relationships with peers, or to work with strong mentors and coaches in making life decisions.



Medine sought for a way to address this lack of guidance and support and found it through a unique approach to leadership training that integrates personal, interpersonal, and professional development in a team-oriented setting.

Robert Sherman of the **Surdna Foundation**, which has been supporting Medine's work for nine years, underscored the deeply integrated experience that Leslie and her colleagues bring to their process. "Most leadership development programs focus solely on the professional skills required to lead an organization," noted Medine. "If we want to sustain young leaders and keep them in the field we must integrate personal and interpersonal skill building as well."

#### An Impressive Record of Accomplishment

To date, On The Verge has provided 72 young people in their twenties and early thirties with the critical tools and support they need to lead social change efforts in their communities. Thirty On The Verge leaders (called Vergers) now hold significant leadership positions in nonprofit and public sector organizations. Vergers have even joined forces to found their own organizations. In 2005, a group of Vergers in Napa County established V.O.I.C.E.S., the first youth-led center for emancipated foster youth in the country.

In what is perhaps the most telling indication of the program's effectiveness, graduates of the program are now providing ongoing training and support for each other and for new Vergers. Initially a one-year opportunity, the Verger experience is fueling a movement of strong young leaders committed to training new leaders.

#### A Model Leadership Development Program: Collective, Continuous and Contextual

On The Verge exemplifies all three elements of the **framework GEO developed** to guide grantmakers in maximizing their investments in leadership development:

- *Collective* learning, which nurtures the leadership capacity of multiple people within and/or across organizations, is one of the core principles of On The Verge. Vergers learn, grow and engage in social change projects within a community of peers and within their local communities. "We train them in teams of 15-20 – the size of organizations they're likely to lead," explains Medine. "Through this process, youth learn when to lead and when to follow. Moreover, they learn from and build personal commitments to each other as human beings."

- Recognizing that one-time workshops hold limited value to bring about and sustain organizational change, On The Verge uses a *continuous*, ongoing and multifaceted strategy to build leadership. Young leaders participate in a one-year leadership program that now extends to ongoing peer-based support through the Verger-led alumni program.
- On The Verge uses a *contextual* approach to engage young people in hands-on organizing to affect change in their own communities. Vergers develop and implement community-based projects with the support of fellow Vergers and coaches. Vergers have even started their own community organizations, from the first youth-led foster emancipation program to an Arts Integration program at an elementary school in Napa County.



### "A true learning organization"

John Esterle, executive director of **The Whitman Institute**, who has been funding On The Verge since its inception, appreciates how the organization critically examines and adapts the program's design. "Each iteration of the program has incorporated learning and become more sophisticated," Esterle observed. With each new group of young leaders, Medine and Jordan assess and re-design their approach. For example, early

Vergers, armed with a strong understanding of the principles of organizational effectiveness and tremendous energy to work toward social change, found it difficult to work in organizations that lacked these practices. Medine and Jordan adjusted their program to help Vergers create their own organizations. As a result, a group of Verger teachers in San Jose, Oakland and Napa counties are currently designing the first teacher-led Teacher Preparation and Credentialing Program.

Such learning may not have happened, however, without the flexibility provided through multi-year, general operating support. "Long-term and unrestricted funding supports the learning and innovation needed to have an impact," said Esterle who provides such grants. "If foundations are serious about leadership development and supporting their nonprofits, start with giving leaders what they say they most need – multi-year, unrestricted, general operating support."

### Next Generation Organizations

Medine is also learning that we're not only nearing a *leadership* transition but an *organizational* transition as well. "Members of this next generation don't intend to stay in their current positions for more than 2-3 years; they'll stay as long as they are learning and there are opportunities to grow." After that, they see themselves moving on to another organization or even another field. "Such mobility will have a tremendous impact on the sector, on how we think about organizations," she warns. "Organizations won't be able to afford having their principles and practices living only in the executive director; they will need to be much more explicit about them."

Building the next generation of organizations, she says, will require a cross-generational approach, and she is now developing a program to facilitate older leaders working with younger leaders.

### Conclusion

On The Verge demonstrates that not only do grantmakers have an important role to play in building the next generation of leaders, but that the long term impact of any investment in leadership is sustained through multi-year and operational support.

Interested in learning more about this program? Please visit [www.onthemovebayarea.org](http://www.onthemovebayarea.org).

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations | 1413 K Street, NW, 2nd Floor | Washington, DC 20005 | 202-898-1840 | 202-898-0318 (Fax)