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Collaboration for Community Impact

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Our first article, "Building Our Capacity for Curiosity, Compassion, and Courage" came out in the January/February, 2019 issue of *Exchange*. When we wrote that article, we were reconciling our experiences grappling with the big questions facing the field. Each of us had sat at different metaphorical tables and witnessed interactions and dynamics that seemed to be hindering progress. In the last two years we have found ourselves coming back to the dispositions of curiosity, compassion, and courage, time and time again.

The precarious position of child care, mixed with a global pandemic, created new challenges. In these challenges, we both gained opportunities to participate in collaborative efforts to create meaningful impacts in the lives of children, families, and practitioners. During this time, our mentors challenged us. Roz Zuest, a colleague and

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Collaboration: working cooperatively with others to produce or create something you cannot do as well alone.

Collaborative relationships have the power to create change, to break down silos and to challenge institutions, structures, systems, and prejudices.

What collaboration is not: Group projects where one person leads and tells others what to do (who's been here?!)

- Hierarchical

- Where the dominant narrative and voice is centered and ultimately chosen by default

Community Impact creates a social return on investment by designing and implementing strategic funding and intervention efforts to improve the well-being of children, youth and families.

mentor, encouraged reflection. As she says, "Is what you are doing together efficient, effective, and equitable?" Through the reflective process we came to the conclusion that curiosity, compassion, and courage serve us not only in individual leadership, but also in systems change.

If you want to go quickly, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.
—*African Proverb*

Curiosity as a Form of Awareness Building

"We cannot possibly change or grow what we cannot 'see'."
—*J.D. Daniel, Ph.D.*

Often, different people or organizations come together to solve problems, making it critical to set the stage for shared understanding. This includes being clear about the scope of the work and how it relates to the goals and motives of each entity. Curiosity is one tool that can help identify the root cause, or the need to collaborate. When coming together to explore questions like those listed in Figure 1, everyone benefits. The process makes the assumptions, understandings and motives that influence the group's dynamic clear. Also important is to remain open-minded while the group collectively addresses the answers to these questions. Naturally, each of these questions likely impacts the organizations and communities we serve. As such, feelings and emotions may be strong. The practice of being open-minded allows you to assess any resistance with respect, kindness, and empathy.

It can be very frustrating to arrive at a meeting or work session and find that there is disconnect. Many times the disconnect is related to underlying motives. It is easy to make the assumption that everyone is working toward

the same goal. It is also easy to assume that everyone has the same information, context, and purpose. While coming together to discuss these questions is uncomfortable, not being clear can create unnecessary burdens. As Brené Brown neatly explains, "Being clear is kind, being unclear is unkind" (Brown, 2018).

Here are four considerations as you read through the table of questions derived to spark curiosity:

● **Do your research and show up prepared.** It is likely that the work you are doing is influenced by a number of outside factors. Understanding the systems landscape that impacts your issue can help you see the issue from other perspectives, and foster increased understanding when the solutions are not easy or clear cut. Do some investigating online or in your networks. Consider whether or not there is research that has been done on the topic.

● **Actively listen.** While in conversations, repeat back to yourself (or your colleagues) your understanding of what they are saying. New ideas can be a great way to expand your worldview, and can bring about opportunities that you might not have been exposed to otherwise.

● **Understand the standards of practice.** In "Extraordinary Outcomes: Shaping an Otherwise Unpredictable Future," authors Iris R. Firstenberg and Moshe F. Rubinstein list the following universal values that are fundamental for "creating a team with one mind that is focused on purpose and equipped to achieve extraordinary outcomes": trust, respect, integrity, empathy, inclusion, and communication.

● **Do not fear discomfort.** Author Ijeoma Oluo cautions that we should

all be wary of comfort. Lean into discomfort when working in collaboration with others, especially if your effort is aiming to address systemic injustice in the field of early childhood education. If you are uncomfortable, you are likely learning and growing.

Compassionate Communication

Compassionate communication prioritizes the connection between people and fostering understanding. Many times this looks like stepping out of the "expert" role and communicating humbly. Compassionate communicators are attuned to their audience, considering what the other person might be experiencing. This includes being sensitive to that experience and ensuring that the emotional climate is safe. Are breaks offered when emotions run high? Leaders foster compassionate communication when they model how to regulate themselves and maintain clarity. Compassionate communication acknowledges the lived experience that people bring to the issue, and avoids speculation. As Toma Ramirez writes, "Rather than blindly believing or denying what someone else says, or assuming that you disagree, find out for yourself if you believe something or not."

Compassionate communicators are aware of the level of language they use, aiming to speak in plain English. Other considerations include defining acronyms and using inclusive terms to describe people. We advocate for using people-first language in compassionate communication. People First Language is used commonly when discussing disability/ability (Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities, n.d.,) however, it can also be applied to other social identities. Notice the difference between saying "marginalized communities" and "communities

Figure 1 - Creating a Shared Vision and Expectation

"The urgency and scale of social problems, coupled with the limited results to date, cry out for new approaches."
—Jane Wei-Skillern, Nora Silver and Eric Heitz in "Cracking the Code."

What is the Plan?	Questions to Ask
Collaborative Deliverables "All beginnings require exceptional care if they are to result in great harvest." —The I-Ching	What is the purpose of the collaboration? Specifically, what are we here to do? And why does it matter? What are the underlying assumptions driving the plan? What is each person's individual and organizational capacity to help move the initiative forward?
Budget and Timeline "First, have a definite, clear practical ideal; a goal, an objective. Second, have the necessary means to achieve your ends; wisdom, money, materials, and methods. Third, adjust all your means to the end." —Aristotle	Who is the fiscal agent? Is the work timebound? Is the goal feasible? Is the goal sustainable? If so, under what conditions?
Leadership and Effective Team Management "The balance point--often called the edge of chaos--is where … life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name life." —Mitchel Waldrop	What are the shared underlying issues? What is the emotional climate around the identified needs? Has the group been intentionally designed? Do the members have preexisting relationships? Or do relationships need to be carefully woven together to unlock the possibilities and capabilities of the group? How will leadership manage the inevitable challenges and adapt? How will performance be measured? If needed, are the leaders willing to revisit the design of the group and make changes? Is the group self-organized and capable of staying on task with little to no supervision?
Internal Stakeholder Analysis "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." —Albert Einstein	What are the participation expectations? Who is asking for the collaboration? Who benefits from the collaboration? Who are the best messengers to call attention to the cause highlighted by the collaboration? When we have different communities who need different things, how do we build upon each other's asks so that we can both harmonize the big ask and improvise for the community-specific ask? What is the appetite for change in the larger community? What are the patterns of interactions the collaborators have within the group and with others we want to invite and support? Who are the positive deviants in the groups and how will they lead us into the future? Does the design include community members' voices? Is there a priority placed on equity?

that have been marginalized." The word order we use implies where the emphasis is, and in some cases where the responsibility lies. PFL allows us to prioritize people in our communication. It also makes power systems clear as well, referring back to our question, "Whose voice is centered?"

Overall, compassion is key to moving our initiatives forward and it requires practice. Not only is this good for your fellow person, but it can be life-changing for you as well.

Courageous Collaboration

"Social courage involves standing up at the risk of social embarrassment, ostracism, rejection, or being unpopular for the sake of a belief, opinion, perspective, cause, or action."
—Ryan Haddon

Courageous collaboration disrupts the status quo. Questioning the status quo can be uncomfortable. Many people are not ready to wrestle with the underlying power systems and dynamics that prevent meaningful progress; in our experience, almost all of these dynamics are rooted in whiteness. Being courageous requires asking questions—even if they are uncomfortable. In courageous collaborations, people address questions such as, what are the power dynamics here? Whose voices and experiences are centered in these conversations? Whose voices are missing?

In this most recent wave of diversity, equity and inclusion attention, there is more awareness of the many communities who have been systematically left out. The usual fixes, such as hiring interpreters, translating materials or adding a board member who comes from a marginalized community, do little to create lasting change or shift paradigms.

Perhaps one of the most powerful questions, and one that we collectively need to ask more frequently, is "Is this our work to do?" Consider the population that the collaboration serves, and whether or not the organizations or people present have lived insight and experience with the issue at hand. All organizations have their limitations, and if there is not genuine connection to the community, even well-intentioned efforts might miss the mark. For example, if the goal is to serve a community that speaks another language, do the organizations have folks from that community at the decision making table? Are there people on staff, and on the ground doing the work, who speak the language and share in the community's culture? Courageous collaboration calls on leaders to know their limits, and discern their place in the work.

In closing, the events of the past two years have brought new insights and learning about the place of curiosity, compassion and courage in our leadership practice. In the coming years, many emerging and experienced leaders in the field will be called on to exercise their systems-thinking skills. We hope that asking ourselves the hard questions, while practicing curiosity, compassion and courage, will help us create long lasting, meaningful impact for children and families.

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