



COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY

Cultivating the Leader Within:
Insights from the CLARE Program

January 23, 2026
1pm - 2:30pm EST



Webinar Speakers



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Land Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge that this session is presented and recorded on the traditional land of the Muscogee, Ohlone, Coast Salish, Muckleshoot, Stillaguamish, Suquamish, Duwamish, and Canarsie people past and present.

We honor with gratitude the land itself and people of these tribes.

Thank you.



Participatory Land Acknowledgement

Please let us know the indigenous lands that you are on in the chat!

If you are not sure whose land you are on, and are based in the United States or Canada, you can either:

- Enter your location here: <https://native-land.ca/>
- Or enter your city or zip code here:
<https://land.codeforanchorage.org/>



Next Steps To Strengthen Knowledge, Relationships, and Accountability to Support Indigenous Communities

First Steps: Learn about the Indigenous lands you are on and the Indigenous people who are part of your community.

Next Steps:

- **Learn about the current context** that is affecting Indigenous People and Tribes in your community;
- **Build knowledge and relationships** with Indigenous-led organizations, coalitions, and organizing groups;
- **Support** Indigenous-led work and movement-building.

Resources to Explore

Native Governance Center (nativegov.org) provides multiple resources to help move forward, including, “[Beyond Land Acknowledgement: A Guide](#),” and “[Beyond Land Acknowledgement Explainer Video](#).”



Grounding Exercise



Tech Tips for Today

- We want to hear from you! Please share your **questions** in the **Q&A** box
- Live captions are **automatically** on. If you wish to turn them off, go to **Live Transcript** in your webinar menu and choose “Hide Subtitle”
- Please **turn off** all AI assistants
- If you have technical difficulties or need support, please share in the chat or email Tracy Timmons-Gray at tracy.timmons-gray@collectiveimpactforum.org



Collective Impact Forum Team and Advisors



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The Collective Impact Forum is co-led and managed by FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.

The Forum raises its own funds for its programming, while knowledge and learning is shared bi-directionally with our home organizations.



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Webinar Framing & Flow

Purpose

Share insights and learnings from the *Collective Leadership Advancing Racial Equity (CLARE)* leadership development program pilot.

Agenda

1	Welcome	<i>15 min</i>
2	Why Backbone Leadership	<i>10 min</i>
3	The CLARE Program	<i>15 min</i>
4	Learnings & Insights	<i>25 min</i>
5	Audience Q&A	<i>15 min</i>
6	Wrap Up + Next Steps	<i>10 min</i>



Thank You!





Backbone Leadership Is Different

Dedicated staff who support the **facilitation, coordination, and project management** of a collaborative initiative working towards a common goal.

Backbone leaders are leading collaboratively and collectively to:

- Keep everyone aiming at and making progress on a big result
- Align organizations with different approaches, relationships, and competing interests
- Guide leaders and groups to change beliefs, actions, programs
- Create belonging and accountability



Backbone Leadership Skills and Mindsets

- Self-awareness
- Negotiating
- Relational
- Politically savvy (small p)
- Recognize people's assets
- Difficult conversations
- Consultative
- Build and maintain bridges
- Zoom out/ Zoom in
- Nimble/Adaptive
- Embrace complexity



Individual Leadership



Collaborative Leadership



Collective Leadership



CLARE Leadership Approach Defined

- **Individual Leadership:** The **values, lived experiences, and skills of individuals** that shape how they assume formal and informal leadership roles. Individual leadership is **self-driven, autonomous, and does not have to be negotiated.**
- **Collaborative Leadership:** The **embodiment and practice of your individual leadership**. The way an individual brings their full self, including their values, lived experience, and leadership skills, to **create the conditions for a group to work together in pursuit of a common goal**. It is about **building trust, cultivating alignment, and enabling others to step into leadership**. It is a **relational and adaptive practice** that helps a group move beyond individual agendas towards a collective vision and action.
- **Collective Leadership:** What becomes possible when strong collaborative leadership has created the trust, structure, and alignment needed for **leadership and power to be distributed across a group**. It is both a model of shared leadership and an approach to sustaining it. The group **shares responsibility, decision-making, and accountability, and members lead from where they sit**, both **within the collaborative and across their systems and networks**, to advance a common agenda. The leader's role shifts to holding the container lightly, sensing where coordination is needed, and supporting others to lead from their spheres of influence in service of systems change.



Insights from Backbone Leaders

- Feeling isolated and “alone” doing the facilitative, brokering work of a backbone – without many peers in their local community that they can learn with and from
- Experiencing burnout and fatigue, causing them to question continuing in place-based work
- A desire to network and be in a peer-learning environment with others leading place-based work



Why Invest In Backbone Leadership: Research

- While the collective impact, place-based field has grown significantly over the past decade, **investment in building the leadership pipeline and retaining collaborative leaders – particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leaders – has not kept pace.**
- Research from Harvard EdRedesign Lab's 2023 cross-sector field study underscores the need to **develop BIPOC leaders to sustain collaborative work and achieve systemic transformation and racial equity.**
 - Supporting leaders to change systems while **centering relationships, prioritizing BIPOC staff wellbeing, and investing in mid-career staff.**
- The backbone role is unique and there is often an **incomplete understanding of the skills and mindsets required to assume it.**
- **BIPOC leaders** engaged in equity-focused place-based collaborative systems change are often **under-supported, facing challenges of burnout and underdeveloped capacity** to move the work forward.



The CLARE Program

10-month, cohort-based program of 20 BIPOC leaders committed to advancing place-based* collaborative efforts at the intersection of equity and systems change in the United States.

OBJECTIVES

1. Focus on healing and wellness to sustain participants in their roles by honoring individual and social group traditions and spiritual, sacred and somatic practices that facilitate individual and community healing and addresses burnout and racial harm.
1. Deepen participant analysis of how social identities influence their approach to leadership so that they are leading from a lens of systems thinking and transformation, and in a way that centers the intersectionality of equity.
1. Build social networks and collective power amongst BIPOC leaders that can be leveraged to support work to advance systems change in respective communities.



Applicant Pool

- **NUMBER OF APPLICANTS:** 175
- **APPLICANT TYPE:**
 - Leaders of collaboratives, coalitions, and backbone organizations from local to national levels
- **REASONS FOR APPLYING:**
 - Strengthen leadership skills specific to collective impact and systems change.
 - Deepen racial equity frameworks and practical tools to embed equity into collaboratives.
 - Build peer networks of BIPOC leaders and reduce isolation/burnout through healing/wellness practices.
 - Receive coaching and concrete strategies to scale or sustain initiatives and translate equity into operations and policy.
 - Gain technical skills (data, evaluation, facilitation, governance) to support collaboratives.



Insights from Applicant Pool

APPLICANTS DESIRED:

- Relationship building and peer learning
- Integrated support that combine equity analysis
- Pragmatic tools for scaling & sustaining collaboratives
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Technical and skills-based support on collective impact and the backbone role

Despite focus on place-based collaboratives, received a significant number of applicants leading state and national collaborative work.



Inaugural Collective Leadership Advancing Racial Equity Cohort

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY 2025 COHORT





Cohort Snapshot

- **Average Time In Role:** 2.5 years
- **Range of Roles:** Mid-Career; Program Manager/Director to Executive Director
- **Issue Area Focus*:** Health (10), Non-Health (10)
- **Geographic Location:** South (11), Mid-West (4), West Coast (3), Mountain West (1), Northeast (1)

Issue Area Focus*

- Community Development
- Community health/prevention (including ACEs)
- Cradle to Career
- Economic Development (Health System Anchor Institution)
- Education (early childhood)
- Environment/nature
- Food justice
- Housing
- Maternal/Child health
- Social Determinants of Health
- Substance Use (High Risk Drinking)
- Workforce development
- Youth health and wellbeing



Core Design Elements

Design Element	Description/Purpose
Kick-Off Retreat	Hosted in person over two-days, the retreat was designed to support community building and connection, deep self exploration, and aspects of self-care and wellness through somatic practices.
Virtual Sessions (Bi-monthly)	Occur every-other month, virtual sessions were designed with aspects of self-care and wellness through somatic practices; building relationships; exploring new content, resources, and tools; shared accountability to the individual action commitments; and peer consult on emergent challenges.
Home Teams	Grouped based on key similarities (issue area, geography, etc.), these teams connected in each session to build deeper relationships and connections, provide peer consult on real time challenges, and shared accountability for individual action commitments. .
1:1 Leadership Coaching	Using an emergent approach, participants had access to six 1:1 coaching sessions with a certified leadership coach to support self-determined aspects of their leadership.



- In-Person touchpoints are critical when mostly virtual
- Begin with grounding practice and celebration
- Offer space/time to connect informally
- Balance content, reflection, and application
- Intentional space for BIPOC leaders (identity and culture)



Content

Learning Need	Approach
How backbone leaders' personal histories, experiences and identities shape how they lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unpacking Conditioned Patterns/ Limiting Behaviors• True Self/False Self Framework• Embodiment: Be-Do-Have Framework
How leaders understand wellness and self-care as a core to their leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Centering Practices• Visualization• Tools for Recognizing and Honoring Needs
How backbone leaders understand their role within the collaborative ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative and Collective Leadership Framing• Social Change Ecosystem Mapping
How systems carrying trauma and harm require healing in order for transformation to occur within backbone leaders and the collaborative ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Healing Centered Systems Change



Overall Experience & Impact



Participants rated their CLARE experience 8.7/10 on average, with many reporting transformative personal and professional growth. Reported ratings ranged from 7 to 10.

Key impacts on participants



Increased confidence Participants gained stronger belief in their leadership skills



Permission to lead authentically Participants gave themselves permission to lead as their whole, authentic selves



Validation Participants felt recognized and affirmed as leaders



Balance Participants gained a clearer understanding of self-care as leadership practice



Strengthen relationship-building capacity Participants gained a clearer understanding of the role of relationships in collective impact work, and how to nurture and manage them



Before and After: Shifts in how participants lead



From self-doubt to confidence: Participants moved from questioning their value to feeling affirmed and validated as leaders. They gained confidence in their skills and contributions, speaking up in meetings instead of staying silent, recognizing their unique perspective matters, and understanding they belong in leadership spaces. As one participant shared: "I no longer assume others know more than me."



From depleted to re-energized: Despite the inherent challenges of collective impact work, participants left CLARE feeling renewed energy and commitment to the work. Some shifted from cynicism to optimism about what's possible when communities truly collaborate.



From performing to authentic leadership: Participants gained permission to lead as their whole, authentic selves rather than performing leadership in prescribed ways. They recognized that what they need most isn't more technical skills, but removing barriers to showing up as who they truly are.



From transactional to relational: Participants developed a clearer understanding of relationships as foundational to collective impact work. They became more focused on relationship-building, more mindful of who's missing and what roles are needed to make a successful collaborative, and more committed to ensuring people impacted by issues are present and centered in the work.



From stressed to balanced: Many participants created healthier relationships with work, feeling more relaxed and less stressed. Participants discussed how caring for themselves and learning to delegate allowed them to show up as better, more focused leaders.



The CLARE pilot reveals an opportunity to invest in deeper, more transformational leadership support within the place-based field that emphasize:



Leadership As A Practice, Not a Style



Deep Interpersonal Work



Focus On Self-care and Wellbeing



Emergent Leadership Coaching



Peer connection and community



What Are Participants Saying

“My mindset about leadership changed during CLARE. There was a moment when I realized, it's not that I'm here to learn to be this leader that I'm not. I'm here to become my best self.”

“CLARE helped me feel more confident as a leader. There are spaces that used to give me anxiety. Now when I do decide to go, I have the confidence to say yes, I belong here. And yes, they do need to hear my voice. And it is important.”

“CLARE made me more self-aware. [When I have] traumas showing up in different ways, whether it's me being self critical of myself, my work, not believing in myself, etc. When those feelings start to creep up in settings where I have to facilitate rooms where I'm very different or rooms where there is a lot of conflict, I think CLARE has given me just that self-awareness and now it feels less overwhelming. That's a huge shift that I've seen from my CLARE experience.”

“CLARE brought me back to the work. I think I was at a point where I was just doing tasks in order to become the best in my role. This program reset my thinking and helps me understand that I am enough. From this place of authenticity, I can move differently.”



Audience Questions





What Can You Do

Backbone Leaders

- When possible, seek out peer connections that create opportunities to share experiences, insights, and strategies with others in similar backbone roles.
- Reflect on what you need to be effective in the backbone leadership role, and assess what forms of development, support, or learning are available within your organization. Where appropriate, share those insights internally. If these supports are not available, identify external opportunities that could help meet those needs.

Backbone Organizations and Place-based Collaboratives:

- When possible, allocate resources to leadership development that reflects the unique demands of the backbone role, and supports both the inner work (self-awareness, healing, resilience) and the relational and systems change work (shared leadership, facilitation, alignment, and systems strategy) as core to the backbone role.
- Build internal infrastructure and supports that enable ongoing leadership development.



What Can You Do

Funders:

- Assess the leadership development ecosystem and unmet needs for backbone leaders, and use this analysis to guide investment strategies.
- Fund leadership development as a core strategy for achieving systems change outcomes, recognizing that collaborative impact is constrained or enabled by leadership capacity.
- Support multi-year, blended approaches that integrate technical backbone skills, adaptive leadership development, and coaching.
- Expand investments beyond programs and initiatives to include the leaders responsible for leading and sustaining collaborative efforts at local, state, and national levels, including through coordination or collaboration with other funders where possible.



Want to:

LEARN together? Email courtney.robertson@collectiveimpactforum.org to schedule a conversation.

PARTICIPATE in the next cohort? [Register](#) to join the waitlist.

FUND the next cohort? Be on the lookout for a follow up email and email courtney.robertson@collectiveimpactforum.org to schedule a conversation.



REGISTRATION IS OPEN FOR THE 2026 ACTION SUMMIT!

- **Opening Keynote** conversation with Emmy-Nominated storyteller and thought leader, **Baratunde Thurston!**
- **Over 30 practical sessions**; recordings of most available for up to 3 months post event
- **Connect with over 1,000** backbone leaders, practitioners, funders, and partners from around the world
- **Earlybird prices available through March 13!**
[Register now.](#)





NEW OFFERING: Backbone Leaders Learning Lab!

- **February 27 - April 10, 2026**
- For **leaders** who support or guide **place-based collaborations**, including collective impact initiatives.
- Offers a **supportive space** to strengthen leadership skills, explore new tools, and connect with peers who understand the realities of collaborative work.





Upcoming Learning Opportunities

The Pursuit of Systems Change (February 2026)

- February 19, 1pm - 4pm ET
- *Faculty: Jennifer Juster and Courtney W. Robertson*

Facilitating Collaborative Meetings (March 2026)

- **Part 1:** Tuesday, March 17, 1pm – 4pm ET
- **Part 2:** Wednesday, March 18, 1pm – 4pm ET
- *Faculty: Courtney W. Robertson*



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