

Change Agents in the American South (DRAFT)

Connecting Leadership for Equity across the Divides of Race, Place and Generation

What is the 'Change Agents in the American South' project?

The *Change Agents in the American South* (CAAS) project is a multi-phase effort to accelerate racial and social equity outcomes in the American South by better understanding and then serving the leadership development, career support and mentorship needs of early and mid-career change agents of color (ages 25-40) working in southern grassroots communities, organized philanthropy and philanthropic support organizations. More specifically, CAAS will convene next generation grassroots leaders working in various social change arenas (i.e. advocacy, activism, community organizing and service delivery) with their similarly aged contemporaries working in philanthropy and philanthropic support organizations across various sectors (i.e. education, health, housing and employment).

The project also intentionally involves veteran, cross-generation advisors (mature grassroots leaders, philanthropy and nonprofit professionals from the Baby Boomer generation who have pioneered social change careers). This approach seeks to address the culture of separation that isolates early career change agents from the range of financial and human resources, social connections and wise perspectives important to advance their work in ways that yield progress for their communities, and are personally sustainable. Practically, CAAS will bring together an initial group of these change agents as co-design partners to develop a leadership learning design, and then field-test and refine the design at convenings with early career change agents of color and veteran cross-generation advisors in several southern cities (Atlanta, GA., Raleigh-Durham, NC and the Gulf Region).

Project History

CAAS originated from a series of informal conversations and gatherings between Generation X/Y change agents of color working in various roles in philanthropy and community change in the American South. These change agents are living out the reality of institutional observations made by nonprofit analyst Frances Kunreuther and workforce diversity scholar David Thomas that illustrate the complexities of race and generational difference in organizational relationships and institutional change.

The change agents interviewed describe a complex world of hope, paradox and contradiction. They hope for a new prioritization of racial equity, advocacy and social justice in their work and the nonprofit sector more generally. They are often frustrated with their ethnic-cultural colleagues (i.e. both Baby Boomers and their generational contemporaries) who they see as direct beneficiaries of previous social change movements (i.e. civil rights, women's rights). Their critique is that their colleagues seem over-committed to paradigms and strategies that emphasize technical priorities like organizational effectiveness and performance measurement, while suppressing transformative dialogue about structural racism, cultural competence, power, class, pedigree and privilege - all topics critical to "effectively" and authentically engaging communities of color. Finally, this group describes their personal fear of being well-trained, competent and thoughtful professionals who appear to their communities of identity and cultures of origin as "sell-outs", "company men and women" or "window dressing" in support of their institution's public image of progressivism and cultural diversity. In terms of place, these change agents express quiet frustration with the building perception that the South (i.e. its institutions and culture) and their target audiences are dumb, backward and behind related to progressive politics and social change.

These change agents' concerns are also career-centered and practical. They wonder how they can address their dual challenge of credibility - both learning the field's new "technical proficiencies" (i.e. program evaluation, performance measurement) while also pushing for more social and institutional change outcomes through their position in grassroots community, grantmaking or technical assistance provision efforts. Many change agents

living and working in the American South desire leadership development, mentorship and career support. However, they note that their learning interests often don't match the content of leadership development programs or standard professional learning in their fields. These change agents seek a more integrated image and understanding of leadership. At the same time, they appreciate the precariousness of framing "leadership" solely in individual terms. These change agents described a more hopeful, inclusive image of leadership that addresses several manifestations of exclusion (racism, class-ism, sexism, ageism and heterosexism).

Practically, they also describe a desire for sufficient resources and opportunities to broaden their skills, experiences and relationships so they can:

- more *effectively manage* (i.e. develop, execute, fundraise and evaluate) their change program in a given institutional context;
- *expand their leadership and personal agency* (i.e. the quality of change agents' analysis, action-taking, reflection and voice) around complex issues in their field; and
- boundary-span and work across and within racial, generational and cultural differences.

Finally, this group thinks about the future, especially their ability to craft a career in philanthropy and community change that is personally meaningful - offering real prospects of career advancement and financial prosperity – but also allowing them to stay culturally connected.

Why focus on the American South?

Throughout the American South's history, conversations regarding race relations, structural barriers, and social justice have assumed a "Black/White" frame of reference. Each racial-ethnic group (with the exception of indigenous and native people) enters the South through an understanding of race and race relations constructed on the power differences between Whites and Blacks. Symbolically, the American South provided the soil for a race-based prejudice that incubated constructs of white supremacy based on the original template of oppression - the relationship between the slave and slave owner. Today, some Whites continue to exercise power based on these psycho-social foundations re-creating cultural mores, social networks, and institutional structures that maintain their power and privilege. Transforming these cultural arrangements, structural barriers and power differentials in the South represents a critical aspect of social change work and liberation for people of color.

Practically, current demographic and social performance data in education, health and employment clearly portray the fact that poor African Americans, Hispanics and Whites in the American South (particularly in the historic Black Belt) experience serious social disadvantages - ineffective education, inadequate health care, limited economic mobility, poor housing, and marginal civic engagement. Moreover, African Americans in Black Belt counties and the South's growing Hispanics represent the two citizen groups most deeply apprehended by both historic and new patterns of race and class-based inequity. As select Southern metropolitan areas experience prosperity linked to expansions in high-skill, knowledge-intensive economies, a subsequent prosperity pattern has developed mostly among White Southerners who choose residences, schools for their children, and social venues with little to no personal contact with poorer African Americans and Hispanics. This pattern is reinforced by the rise of affluent suburbs with increased political power, and residents with very limited knowledge about African Americans and Hispanics' needs and life experiences, especially non-elite minorities who do not share similar financial wealth and social mobility. Moreover, the declining opportunities for meaningful personal contact and shared social experiences between advantaged whites and disadvantaged minorities is compounded by public school re-segregation, private school homogeneity and non-diverse workplaces.

Since most Southerners (and their elected representatives) are reluctant to support what is outside their experience, many inequities affecting African Americans and Hispanics remain unacknowledged and unaddressed. Yet, these two vulnerable population groups - like Lani Guiner's miner's canary - may most accurately represent the very real harm of newer manifestations of race-based discrimination transacted through benign neglect yet painfully holding social inequities in place. These two vulnerable population groups and their

Change Agents in the American South

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communities also represent the most hopeful beneficiaries of the *Change Agents for the American South* (CAAS) project, and the rationale for supporting African American and Hispanic, early career change agents.

Why is a grassroots perspective critical?

The CAAS project focuses on capturing the personal stories, career experiences and front-line wisdom of *all* change agents of color working and living in the American South. In particular, CAAS leadership is particularly committed to including grassroots change agents (in both the design and convening processes) to more sharply understand their leadership needs and career transitions. Grassroots leaders often represent small numbers (or worst missing voices) in dialogues on next generation leadership and leadership transitions. As a consequence, leadership development curriculum and design often lack the “feeling of the frontline” and a true sensitivity to the complexities poor people experience trying to negotiate their lives. In addition, there has been a professionalization of social justice work in the non profit sector that overvalues intellectual analysis and post-graduate training over grounding experiences with community constituents (e.g. trends like needing a Masters Degree for an “entry level” position). We believe that there are many other valuable dimensions of these individuals’ leadership – both on the ground and in institutions - operating across many different sectors. To bring these dimensions in clearer view and understand a larger collective experience, it is important to include diverse voices during the respective CAAS convenings.

Which Change Agents: Understanding Change Agents’ Personal Mission and Social Usefulness

For the purposes of this project, the change agents of interest have the following characteristics:

1. **generation/age**: individuals ages 25-40, Generation X and Y;
2. **race**: individuals of color (ie. various ethnic-racial groups including but not limited to African American, Latino American, Native Americans and Asian Americans);
3. **place**: individuals working in the 11 states of the American South, especially in grassroot communities, organized philanthropy and philanthropic support settings;
4. **sector**: representing a variety of sites and settings both in direct engagement with constituents of interest OR in direct support of them. Examples include places that focus specifically on community building, community change, racial equity, social change/justice as well as settings where the main focus is health, education, policy, the law but specific attention is given to issues of justice, change and/or equity.
5. **personal characteristics**: individuals who have the following characteristics:
 - a. a social analysis
 - b. a vision and/or strategy for change
 - c. bridging social capital connections
 - d. both general and specific commitments to cultural or social identity groups
 - e. sense of urgency about change

Because of their personal characteristics, unique social relationships and positioning in the American South, we see these change agents as **high leverage points** for various kinds and levels of change (i.e. both in their organizations, home communities and larger social movements). However, we argue that these change agents’ individual and collective ability to play these critical roles in a sustained way requires attention to their needs for:

- Leadership learning
- Mentorship
- Career Development/Attainment
- Respite, Renewal and Sanctuary
- Legitimacy, Protection and Support

Early interviews reveal that these individuals often experience conflict between the competing demands of their legitimate needs for self-care and renewal, and the broader needs of their communities of origin and social change commitments. In a more general sense, these individuals see themselves playing out cultural and/or community

Change Agents in the American South

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commitments to fight against structural and systemic oppression in their multitude of manifestations (i.e. structural racism, discrimination and prejudice arising from differences in class, immigrant status or sexual orientation).

CAAS is particularly interested in creating a leadership learning environment and experience (through the convening events) that allow the change agent participants to describe (in their own voices, through their own views and language) their experience. This learning is essential for the tasks of shaping leadership learning that is salient, powerful and relevant to these individuals' developmental needs and specific professional challenges.

Looking through a Different Lens to Uncover Institutional Racism

It is important to look at change agents through an organizational lens to identify workgroup and organizational issues that need transformation to create supportive practices and environments for these next generation leaders. Change agents of color often play unconscious organizational roles specific to issues of race and class such as “**lightning rods**” (one that is a frequent target of criticism or focus of controversy) as their values and social commitments often reveal gaps between their home organizations' espoused values and actual behaviors. This is particularly true for the ways in which these change agents reveal systemic dynamics and structural realities related to race and class. These artifacts of organizational culture are often explained away as miscues of interpersonal communication, but in fact can represent critical moments when unconscious patterns of thinking and behavior are made manifest with the change agent serving as more a symbolic target or focus.

Moreover, as people of color often working with White elites, change agents may be vulnerable to:

1. being rendered voiceless and invisible;
2. their home institution projecting additional roles of “race” expert or connection, which result in psychological distress and pressure;
3. burden-bearing and heavy lifting due to balancing the competing demands of being technically proficient in their work/professional roles while also being perceived as connected to communities of origin or the agenda of social identity groups.

Relative to this, some particular areas that often go unexplored include:

- change agents relationships with their supervisors, workgroup colleagues and direct reports;
- often change agent's colleagues may be deeply committed to their organization and its effectiveness and efficiency, but not necessarily see themselves activists or even allies working for a particular issue of equity or social change/justice (this may be a source of misunderstanding and mischaracterization of change agents);
- additionally, colleagues may have differing or not yet clarified social or cultural change commitments that put them in conflict or odds with a change agent

Project Assumptions and Learning Questions

Assumption 1: Change and change agents arise in multiple settings (i.e. grassroots/community, nonprofits, philanthropic, corporate, and civic) and there are a variety of approaches to social change perhaps defined by generation, race and place.

Assumption 2: All change agents (regardless of sector, age, pedigree/credentialing, or “professional” experience) have strengths, assets and value that should be recognized, affirmed, and supported.

Assumption 3: Change agents of color experience societal and institutional barriers anchored in structural racism and other long-held systems of oppression that inhibit career acceleration, damage them personally and thereby stifle their ability to sustain community and institutional change. These barriers should be removed to level the career advancement and satisfaction playing fields.

Change Agents in the American South

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Assumption 4: Leadership transition questions and leadership learning edges (i.e. places where personal/professional expertise, development and experience find their limit and meet the need for additional growth or sophistication) may be cohort-specific and influenced by one's race and culture, generation and/or sector. Simultaneously, there are cross-cutting (more universal) themes that connect different cohorts engaged in social change work.

Note: A leadership learning edge manifests as a place where one's cumulative experience or knowledge needs growth or sophistication. These edges can be exposed through the following lines of inquiry: What does one still need to learn or experience to both work effectively and stay culturally grounded in a particular domain of social justice, social change work?

During the convening conversations, we will focus on the following central learning questions:

1. **What priorities** do change agents (of color) working the American South have regarding leadership development, personal agency building, mentorship and career support?
2. **What questions** do change agents (of color) working the American South have regarding cross-generation topics like leadership transitions, succession planning, and legacy building?
3. **What challenges and opportunities** do change agents of color experience working on social change, social justice and equity themes in the American South? How could these barriers be minimized and bridges be built or strengthened?
4. **Do difference-sensitive, equity-oriented institutional practices** (i.e. particularly for staff of color, young people, and women) enhance an institution's overall performance, effectiveness and organizational culture? What leadership and institutional practices accelerate and support social justice, racial equity and community change?
5. **How might change agents' supervisors and their home organizations** (i.e. whether grassroots/community organizations, private foundations, technical assistance providers/intermediaries or philanthropic support organizations) better support their leadership development and career growth?
6. **What supportive practices matter most to enhance the quality of work relationships between change agents of color and their supervisors** (particularly when these are cross-race relationships)? What features are essential in an organizational environment to nurture change agents' leadership and career growth?

Phase I activities include:

Convening an initiating a cross-generation co-design and advisory team to identify, develop and frame the critical issues important to support and cultivate change agents working in various fields of organized philanthropy and community change in the American South.

Developing a preliminary model or learning design and list of key individuals and leadership networks important to include planning and implementing 2-3 convenings in strategic settings in the American South - Atlanta, Georgia; Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC and the Gulf Region of Louisiana. More specifically, the preliminary design will provide a "gathering place" for storytelling, building insight and clarity, and documenting the leadership experiences of change agents living and working in the American South. These gatherings will emphasize the development of personal agency, mentorship and career support for this group. Additionally, a "conversation catalyst" will provide intellectual context for these stories through the lens of generation, race, and place---the American South.

Capturing preliminary insights that arise from the co-design and communities of practice gatherings through focused facilitated dialogue, reflection on practice and content sharing. These preliminary insights will be critical to establishing the core principles that will link the specific communities of practice and the overall leadership learning circle. The idea here is that communities of practice will share knowledge and programmatic strategies for better supporting change agents' effectiveness and development. Documenting change agents' actual practice will offer insight on the impact of place, race-ethnicity and age hold in their social/community change work in the American South.

Change Agents in the American South

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In addition, it will be important to:

- **Capture** the voices and stories of Cross-Generation Advisors regarding transitions, paradigm and internal transformation that needs to happen with the current generation of leadership in order for them to feel comfortable providing us access, legitimacy, (they have to see us a part of their legacy-building)
- **Understand** various cohort members needs, (i.e. leadership, institution-building, ways that they need to be supported in their mentoring roles), expectations, roles (i.e. border partners, who may move and out of our perimeter existing in different parts of the conversation) role that they can and cannot play, places
- **Clarify** the inter-generational dynamics and conflicts – the pain that the generation before us has that has not always been well-processed and the assumptions that both generations make about commitment, “realness”, legitimacy, and integrity.

The project will create a final report of its lessons and insights that can be shared with the larger LLC community via Creating Space VIII, the LLC website and other national convenings and dialogues, as well as disseminated through the project’s change agent partners, funders, and cross-generation advisors. The report will prioritize an analysis of the role of place, race, and generation in framing these leaders’ development and the learning design necessary to serve these needs. The report will also focus on appreciating the American South’s unique strengths, experiences, and challenges, and how these affect change agents and their work. In addition, to the final report document, a theory of change for a companion position paper about the importance of race, gender and age analysis will be drafted (with change agent partners invited to co-author its various parts). The desired phase one outcome is the development of a learning design for engaging cross-generational/cross-sector change agents of color. Finally, CAAS will develop a theory of change and clarity about how to support change agents’ leadership needs highlighting high potential strategies necessary for consistent healthy and systemic change work to occur in the South.

A second phase of work will include field testing and validating the learning design and theory of change in three new southern cities - Charleston, Memphis, and Little Rock. Additionally, White allies (both contemporary and cross-generation resources) will be engaged for their stories, counter-narratives, alternative perspectives, and to foster cross-race connections and cross-cultural exchange. We see this particular dimension as critical for more deeply understanding how White allies’ career and development needs and professional experiences run parallel and counter to those of their peers of color. The third phase of work will concentrate on the development of a tool kit of organizational practices that can be operationalized to support change agents of color and their leadership learning, mentorship and career support needs as well as address the structural barriers that can undermine these important supports.

Change partners include:

- Andrea Anderson, Aspen Roundtable for Community Change
- William Buster, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
- Rahn Dorsey, Abt & Associates
- Tracey Greene-Dorsett, National Rural Funders Collaborative
- Lavastian V. Glenn, Neighbors for Better Neighborhoods
- Anton Gunn, South Carolina Fair Share
- Nathaniel Smith, Atlanta Neighborhoods Development Partnerships, Inc.

Cross-Generation Advisory Committee includes:

- Patrick Corvington, Anne E. Casey Foundation
- David Dodson, MDC, Inc. (project fiscal agent)
- Leslie Grady, Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta (invited)
- Lynn Walker Huntley, Southern Education Foundation
- Rusty Stahl, Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy
- Gladys Washington, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

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