



## SECTOR EFFECTIVENESS

# What is a Flourishing Leadership Ecosystem?



Investing in leaders is a core value at the Barr Foundation, where we are dedicated to nurturing capable leaders who think strategically, develop new approaches, and collaborate to drive change.

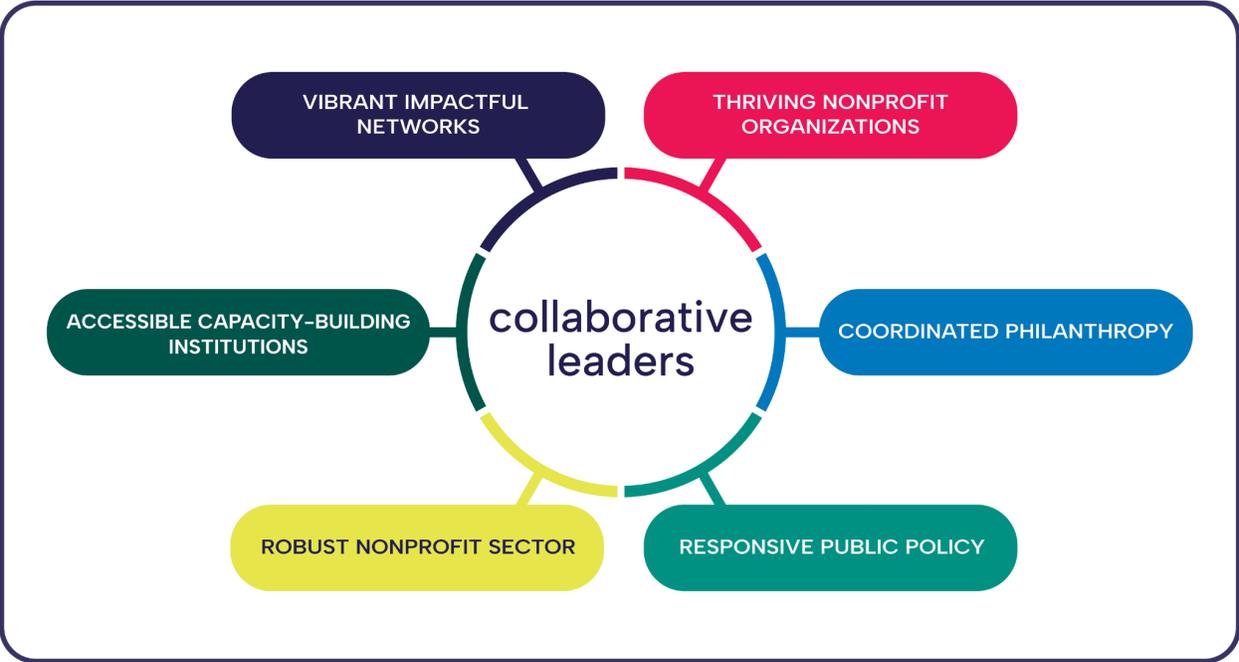
We understand that such leaders best develop within a flourishing leadership ecosystem, where diverse networks of bold, intergenerational changemakers work together to create a vibrant and prosperous Commonwealth.

Too often, a historically narrow view of what it means to be a leader has contributed to the development of systems and supports that ultimately stymie individual vision and organizational effectiveness. Ineffective, inequitable systems can suppress authentic relationships, collaborative engagement, and the building of thriving movements.

We're working to counter that narrow view, realizing that leaders exist across many contexts – including nonprofits, informal community groups, schools, government, faith communities, philanthropy, and businesses. Additionally, leaders can lead from any seat or role, whether they stand inside or outside a traditional organization. Supporting leaders across sectors requires bolstering the resources that nurture, train, and unite them as they address the pressing needs of their communities.

Taking this broader view into account, a flourishing ecosystem for leadership develops collaboratively among participants, ensuring leaders recognize their interdependence. In this context, not only do leaders themselves flourish, but the organizations they lead excel.

## The Ecology of Flourishing Leadership



## What does this look like?

A thriving leadership ecosystem provides space and opportunities where leaders feel safe and empowered to tell their own stories. It allows all community members to show up as their whole selves, bringing their unique cultures, experiences, and perspectives. It is an environment firmly rooted in justice and belonging — affirming a sense of safety, agency, and inclusion — among diverse people and communities.

We'll know the ecosystem is flourishing when leaders talk with energy about the work they do, create new spaces and ways to connect to joy and creativity, and feel that their skills are strengthening and expanding.

This vision is ambitious and comprehensive, achievable only through the combined and coordinated efforts of everyone in the ecosystem, especially philanthropic institutions and social sector actors.

## What will it take to get there?

An ecosystem, by definition, includes many different entities that work together. In the leadership context, this ecosystem includes aspirational elements like these:

- **Collaborative individual leaders** who reflect the communities they serve in a wide variety of positions. They have a manageable workload, work with one another across the state's geographies and demographics, deftly manage complex issues and situations, and spot opportunities for new approaches. They collaborate with others who share their goals to lead change courageously and generously.
- **Thriving nonprofit organizations** that contribute to a robust nonprofit sector. Guided by the communities they serve, they maintain good financial health, pay staff a livable wage, attend to employees' wellness and well-being, and foster a supportive and equitable culture. They seek solutions to their own issues and to the community's. Employees are encouraged to show up as their whole selves, with their unique cultures and experiences.

- **A robust nonprofit sector** that advocates for itself, creating pathways for leadership and multiple opportunities for nonprofits across issue areas to connect with each other. It identifies common problems as it develops and pushes for innovative solutions.
- **Accessible capacity-building institutions** that deliver opportunities for professional and organizational development, including rest, restoration, networking, and other practices that help staff and organizations to thrive. They have sufficient opportunities for emerging, middle-level, and experienced senior leaders as well as supports for organizations as they grow and change over time. They support individuals, organizations, and networks in expanding knowledge and sharpening skills while prioritizing equity and considering the needs of populations that are often marginalized.
- **Vibrant, impactful networks** that work together for more equitable, vibrant, and thriving communities. They foster trust and relationships of mutual interest and care, providing members with space and time for innovation. They integrate and prioritize the voices of the broader community, and organize and develop the full range of expertise, experience, and out-of-network relationships required to advance their ideas effectively. They are prepared and willing to act collectively in moments of solidarity so that all residents and community members can thrive.
- **Responsive public policy** requires stakeholders to engage and maintain relationships with social sector leaders across the state. Policymakers, who reflect and have a deep understanding of the communities they represent, regularly share technical expertise, thought partnership, and community connection. They use disaggregated data to inform policy decisions that improve impact for communities.
- **Coordinated local philanthropy** that operates with a broad, informed view about the shape and strength of the state's social sector and how much it depends on resilient leaders and organizations. Philanthropists understand how their strategies can best support innovation. They routinely collaborate, identifying gaps in infrastructure support. They have staff at all levels with life experience reflective of the diverse communities and geographies in which they work. They have a shared commitment to investing in cross-sector leadership at all levels, as well as the well-being and resilience of leaders.

## **What's the final outcome of a flourishing leadership ecosystem?**

Ultimately, different leaders working across sectors and in different positions nurture their own development, build authentic relationships, and together create collective power. Current leaders will be joined by a broader and more diverse group of future leaders who will enthusiastically perpetuate this nurturing cycle. In time, this thriving leadership ecosystem will inspire social and economic policies that respond to the lived realities, needs, wishes, and hopes of community residents.

A flourishing ecosystem requires a deeper understanding of how we contribute (or don't) and intentional coordination. For now, Barr is focused on collaborative leaders, vibrant and impactful networks, and blossoming nonprofit organizations with the ultimate goal of a thriving Commonwealth.