How to Measure the Impact of Rooted Leadership

A New Approach to Leadership Evaluation

Leadership development programs are everywhere yet the ones creating the deepest and most lasting change look very different from traditional models. Programs focused on 'we,' Rooted leadership strengthens leaders who center on community wisdom and lived expertise, collective power, empathy, listening, and the ability to grow the capacity of others and the systems around them. These leaders do not rely on charisma or individual expertise; they unlock the potential of the we. But if rooted leadership is fundamentally different, then so must be the way we evaluate it.

At Community Science, we've learned through years of partnership that measuring rooted leadership requires widening the lens beyond individual behavior change to illuminate its influence on organizations, communities, movements, and systems. This blog offers practical tools for doing exactly that.

Why Rooted Leadership Matters

Rooted leaders center empathy, listening, shared power, and the collective "we." They build the capacity of others and strengthen the systems around them. Their influence shows up not only in individual growth, but in:

Stronger Relationships

Stronger relationship, trust and better collaboration across communities

Expanded Capacity

Expanded community capacity to collaborate and make decisions

Equitable Cultures

More equitable organizational cultures

Stronger Networks

Stronger networks and movements aligned within ecosystems

Systems Change

Conditions for long-term systems change

Quick Tip: Key Questions During Evaluation

What levels of change is the initiative targeting?

Are measures culturally and linguistically appropriate?

What benefits or unintended risks might emerge for leaders?

How does power show up in design and outcomes?

Do experiences differ by leaders9 identities or positions in the system?

How can leaders help interpret the findings?

Part 1: Start With a Systems Diagnostic

Symptoms > Patterns > Systems > Mental Models

Use these guiding questions early in evaluation design to anchor your work in systems thinking:

SYMPTOMS: What do you observe or know from existing data that calls for the initiative?

Examples:

High Staff Turnover

High staff turnover in community-facing roles

Fragmented Partnerships

Fragmented partnerships

Exclusionary Decisions

Decisions made without those most impacted

PATTERNS: What keeps happening because the desired leadership is missing?

Examples:

Burnout Among Leaders

Burnout among leaders who feel isolated

Over-Reliance on Charisma

Over-reliance on charismatic individuals

Cycles of Mistrust

Repeating cycles of mistrust in collaborative efforts

SYSTEMS & MENTAL MODELS

SYSTEMS

What structures, relationships, policies, or practices hold these patterns in place?

Examples:

- Rigid hierarchies in organizations
- Funding mechanisms that reward competition
- Policies that limit shared governance

MENTAL MODELS

What beliefs about leadership sustain or disrupt the status quo?

Examples:

- Leaders must have all the answers
- Efficiency is more important than inclusion
- Communities lack capacity to participate

These insights help you define meaningful outcomes and evaluation priorities.

Part 2: Our Lessons Learned

How to Operationalize Rooted Leadership Evaluation

Go Beyond Individual-Level Metrics.

Traditional leadership programs track self-confidence, skills gained, or knowledge acquired. Consider:

How leaders convene and facilitate others

How shared leadership emerges

How leaders create space for community voice

The quality and inclusiveness of decision-making processes

Measure Relationship and Network Health.

Because rooted leadership is relational, evaluate:

Growth and diversity of networks

Trust and reciprocity

Collaboration across perspectives or organizations

Cross-community alignment

Assess Cultural and Structural Organizational Shifts.

Look for:

Policies that decentralize power

More equitable resource distribution

New norms for listening, feedback, and co-creation

Staff feeling safe to question or challenge mental models

Track Community and Systems-Level Ripples.

Examples:

Community coalitions forming or strengthening

New community-led strategies emerging

Policy or funding shifts aligned with equity

Movement-level alignment around shared values

Use Methods That Honor Culture and Lived Experience

Culturally and linguistically appropriate tools

Participatory sense-making with leaders

Storytelling, observations, and reflective journaling

Community-led interpretation of data

Part 3. Lean into Learning: Questions During Evaluation, Learning, and Continuous Improvement.

Use these questions to guide data collection and interpretation throughout the initiative:

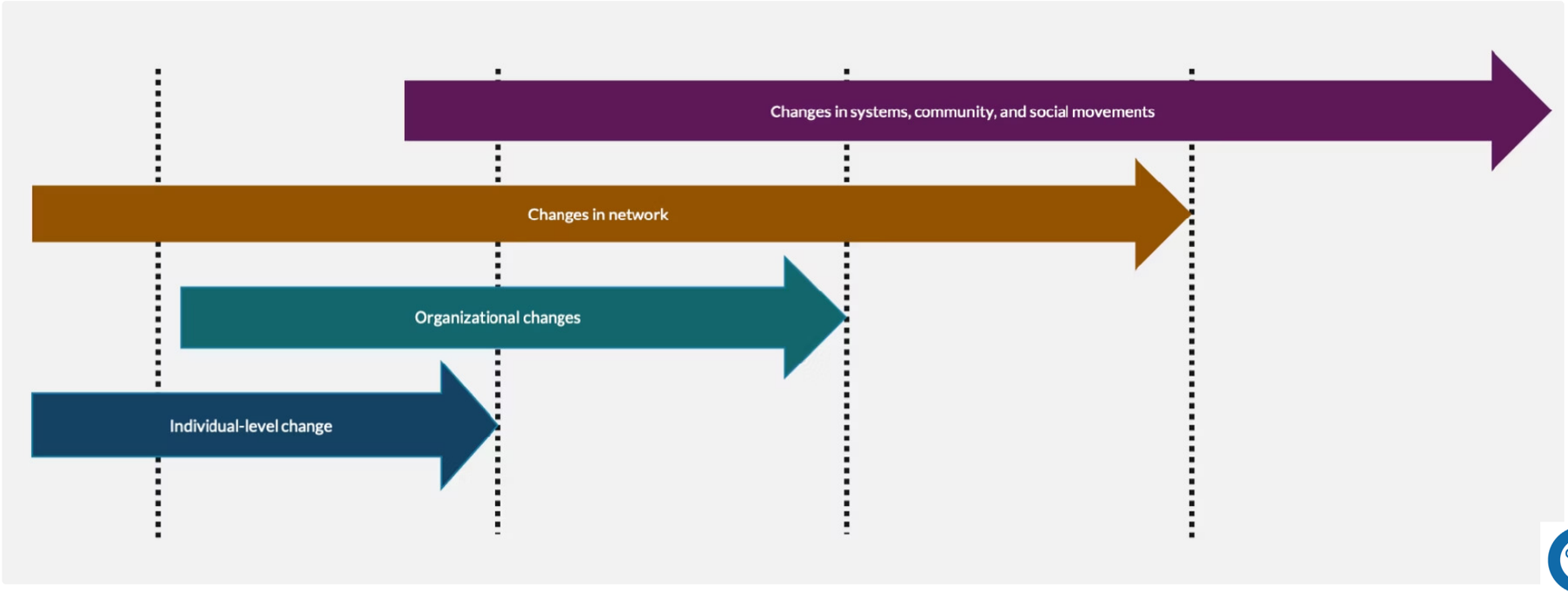
Design & Targeting

Traditional leadership programs track self-confidence, skills gained, or knowledge acquired. Consider:

What level(s) of change are the initiatives targeting to disrupt the status quo?

Are the data collection measures and methods culturally and linguistically appropriate?

Leadership Development Programs' Timeline of Change



Benefits and Risks

What are the benefits AND risks intended and unintended for leaders individually and collectively?

Where does power show up in decisions about the initiative?

Equity & Identity

Are there differences in leaders experiences and outcomes based on their social identities or positions in the system?

Interpretation & Meaningful Engagement

How can leaders be authentically engaged in making meaning of the outcomes?

Conclusion: Evaluating Rooted Leadership Creates Possibility

When evaluations only measure individual change, they miss the real story: Rooted leadership shifts **relationships**, **structures**, **mental models**, and ultimately **systems**. By applying a systems lens and using culturally affirming, participatory approaches, organizations can better understand:

How leadership emerges and is shared

How communities build capacity to act together

How movements strengthen over time

How systems begin to transform

Evaluating rooted leadership is not just about proving impact it's about learning how to create the conditions where organizations and community-centered leadership can thrive.

Need help? Want to go deeper? Let's do some good work together. communityscience.com