

What does it take to support a racial equity community of practice?

Lessons on organizational readiness, collective action, and funder support from the REDI KC Community of Practice

Public awareness of racial injustice has grown in recent years, catalyzed by the profound impacts of the pandemic on the health and economic wellbeing of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, along with continued violence against Black Americans, exemplified by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. In response, many organizations have embarked on a critical examination of their role in addressing equity issues in their communities and how internal structures and operations can either support or hinder this work.

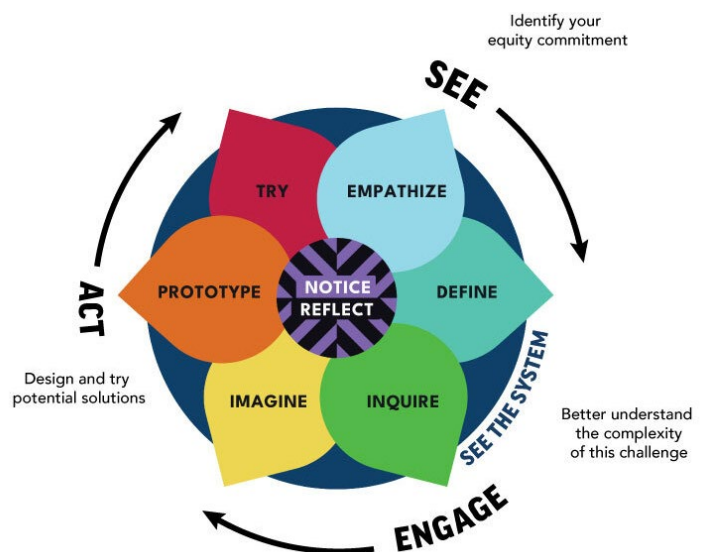
The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, as part of its own long-term learning process to build skills, policies, and practices that foster racial equity, recognized an opportunity for organizations to learn together and support one another in their efforts to advance equity. In April 2021, the Kauffman Foundation brought together 14 organizations from across different sectors in Kansas City (KC), along with its own staff members, to participate in an 18-month Community of Practice (CoP) focused on racial equity, diversity, and inclusion (REDI). In the simplest terms, communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”¹ In the words of one Foundation staff member, participants in the CoP would “learn about REDI issues and wrestle with the challenges (and opportunities) of the region together.”

This brief shares lessons from this effort that speak to the question: *What does it take to support a racial equity community of practice?* Using evaluation findings of this effort, it explores conditions that can make this type of work more impactful. Using this experience as a case example, this brief identifies factors that can facilitate progress by participating organizations, describes issues that can arise when attempting to work collectively, and explores the role of funders in this context. It concludes with recommendations for supporting this type of work in the future. This brief is intended to support the Kauffman Foundation’s internal learning and inform other funders and capacity-builders interested or engaged in similar work. Finally, this brief is a companion piece to [Reflections on the REDI KC Community of Practice](#), which includes additional evaluation findings that were co-created with CoP participants.

About the REDI KC CoP

The Kauffman Foundation partnered with the [National Equity Project](#) (NEP), a leadership and systems change organization, to facilitate learning and practice within the CoP. NEP employed its Liberatory Design approach, which uses design principles to intentionally embrace complexity, reflect, iterate, and experiment to reimagine and redesign more equitable systems. Through this approach, NEP invited participants to see and understand the history and effects of racial oppression in Kansas City, *engage* with one another to better understand these challenges, and *act* within and across organizations to design and try potential solutions (Exhibit 1).²

Exhibit 1. National Equity Project’s Liberatory Design Framework



National Equity Project. April 2021.

¹ Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of its concepts and its uses. Available at: <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/15-06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>

² National Equity Project. Introduction to Liberatory Design. Available at www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/liberatory-design

The CoP started with six sessions designed to build trusting relationships, establish common language and norms, and develop a shared understanding of racial equity challenges in Kansas City. Following this more structured phase, NEP facilitated ten sessions focused on deep reflection and sharing practices to support each participant in strengthening their commitment and actions toward REDI. In addition, NEP offered optional coaching sessions to organizations outside of the CoP meetings.

To support learning, the Kauffman Foundation partnered with Engage R+D, an evaluation and learning firm, to conduct a developmental evaluation of the CoP. Developmental evaluation is an evaluation approach well suited for efforts that are highly innovative, in the early stages of development, and/or occur in dynamic and emergent contexts. At the heart of developmental evaluation is a focus on learning from implementation and capitalizing on ongoing opportunities to share, reflect, and refine programs and strategies as they unfold.

The team developed and adapted learning and evaluation processes to fit with the CoP's evolution and information needs over time, rather than adhering to a pre-determined methodology. This included adapting survey items over the course of the CoP as well as dropping planned methods that no longer served the learning goals of participants and the Foundation. The evaluation incorporated the following data-gathering approaches:



Observations: Engage R+D staff observed six CoP sessions, both virtually and in-person, to gain a deeper understanding of the content and how participants were engaging and learning throughout the CoP.



Surveys: The team conducted two participant surveys (at the beginning of the CoP in September 2021 and at the mid-point in April 2022). The surveys captured participants' reflections on their overall experience in the CoP, growth in individual and organizational equity goals, and how the CoP contributed to collaboration and collective efforts. The surveys had a 61% and 57% response rate, respectively, and included respondents from nearly every participating organization.



Interviews: Towards the end of the CoP, Engage R+D conducted group interviews with each participating organization and three individuals who had transitioned from their organizations into new roles. The interviews explored participants' experience in the CoP, how their equity goals evolved over time, progress and challenges in equity work, and their thoughts on next steps and advice for others doing similar work.



Participant Reflection Sessions: The evaluation was guided by the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF)³ that encourages participant ownership, inclusion, transparency, and honoring multiple truths. Participants came together in four learning sessions to reflect on what they were learning in the CoP and how they were putting that learning into practice. The evaluation team provided tools and learning products with data (i.e., “organizational learning journals”) to document and share back participants' stories for their own use. This participatory and reflective practice also informed the interpretation of evaluation findings.

Learning Questions

The evaluation was guided by the following overarching questions:

- What is participants' experience of the REDI KC program?
- What has been the impact of REDI KC on **individual** participants?
- What has been the impact of REDI KC at the **organizational** level?
- What is the impact, or potential for impact, of REDI KC at the **systems** level?

³ Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). Equitable Evaluation Framework™. Retrieved from Equitable Evaluation Initiative: <https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>.

Organizational Progress on Equity Work, Facilitators, and Barriers

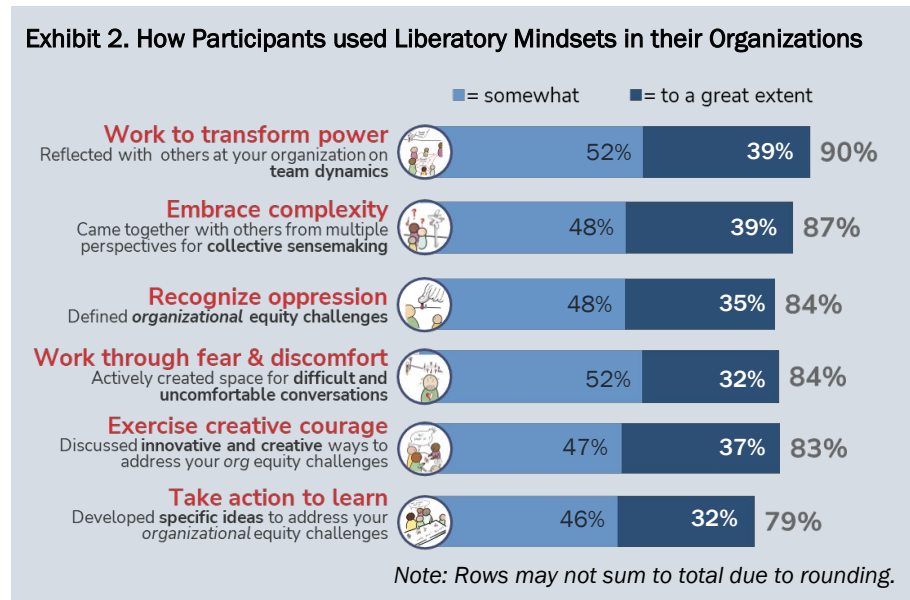
When participants learn from one another in a CoP, they develop new awareness, insights, or practices that inform their work. Communities of practice can also serve to hold participants accountable as they declare their intentions and discuss their progress with the larger group. In bringing together organizations from across Kansas City, the Kauffman Foundation hoped to support them in defining and making progress on their equity goals. Through interviews and surveys, participants shared how their organizational equity work benefitted from the dedicated time, Liberatory Design concepts, and the exchange of ideas in the CoP. Below we describe the types of progress organizations made and the conditions that made that possible.

CoP Members' Progress on Organizational Equity Work

Many participants reported that the CoP experience helped them prioritize and hone their equity work.

Many participants joined the CoP to continue working on existing equity goals at their organizations and learn from one another. While many already had equity work underway, these participants said that having the dedicated space and time in the CoP helped them to continue to prioritize equity. “These ongoing sessions, and the reading and talking about it, give backbone to our ideas,” explained one participant. “[They allow me to] go do things with a sense that this is the right thing to do and not just let it peter out.” Another added, “The biggest way to do more is to stay intentional about these things and keep them top of mind.” The CoP also helped some participants think about their goals differently and more strategically. One participant described how their experience in the CoP, “helped us evolve some of those things that we already had in place,” while another noted how coaching provided by NEP as part of the CoP helped them “broaden our goals beyond just using hiring practices to promote equity.”

As part of the liberatory design process, NEP also introduced Liberatory Mindsets that can be helpful in engaging with one another and designing for equity. The survey results to the right (Exhibit 2) describe the top ways these mindsets were showing up in participations' organizational equity work a year into the CoP.



Roughly half of CoP members reported progress on their organizations' REDI goals, including training and board engagement, incorporating equity into strategic planning, and shifting organizational culture and processes.

Examples of how participants described making progress towards organizational REDI goals include:

- **Training** staff and program participants on what they're learning in the CoP: “Thanks to the resources [from Kauffman], we are going to be able to have an organization-wide workshop around DEI, along with curriculum to keep us going for a few months after.”
- **Engaging boards and leadership** through meetings and trainings to reinforce commitment to REDI strategies: “We've provided training to our board and have really centered a lot of our generative discussions around the four

principles of a purpose-driven board to help them to shape those conversations. We've also onboarded some different board members who are bringing different experiences to the board."

- **Incorporating REDI into strategic planning** processes: "The CoP pushed us to make the strategic plan more robust in terms of having DEI baked into that plan. In theory we serve everyone, but this plan is now very explicit about the diversity of communities we serve and how we uniquely serve underserved and niche audiences."
- **Shifting organizational culture**, mindsets, and ways of working to institutionalize REDI practices: "We're getting buy-in throughout the entire organization that everyone contributes to our REDI practice. It's in our mission statement as who we are as an organization."
- **Updating hiring and talent management processes** to promote inclusion and belonging as well as make space for new leaders: "Belonging and equity and inclusion are really the key to retaining diverse talent. We are making sure that we are actively realizing all of these goals because, without the belonging and without the culture shift, you won't be successful in the long run."

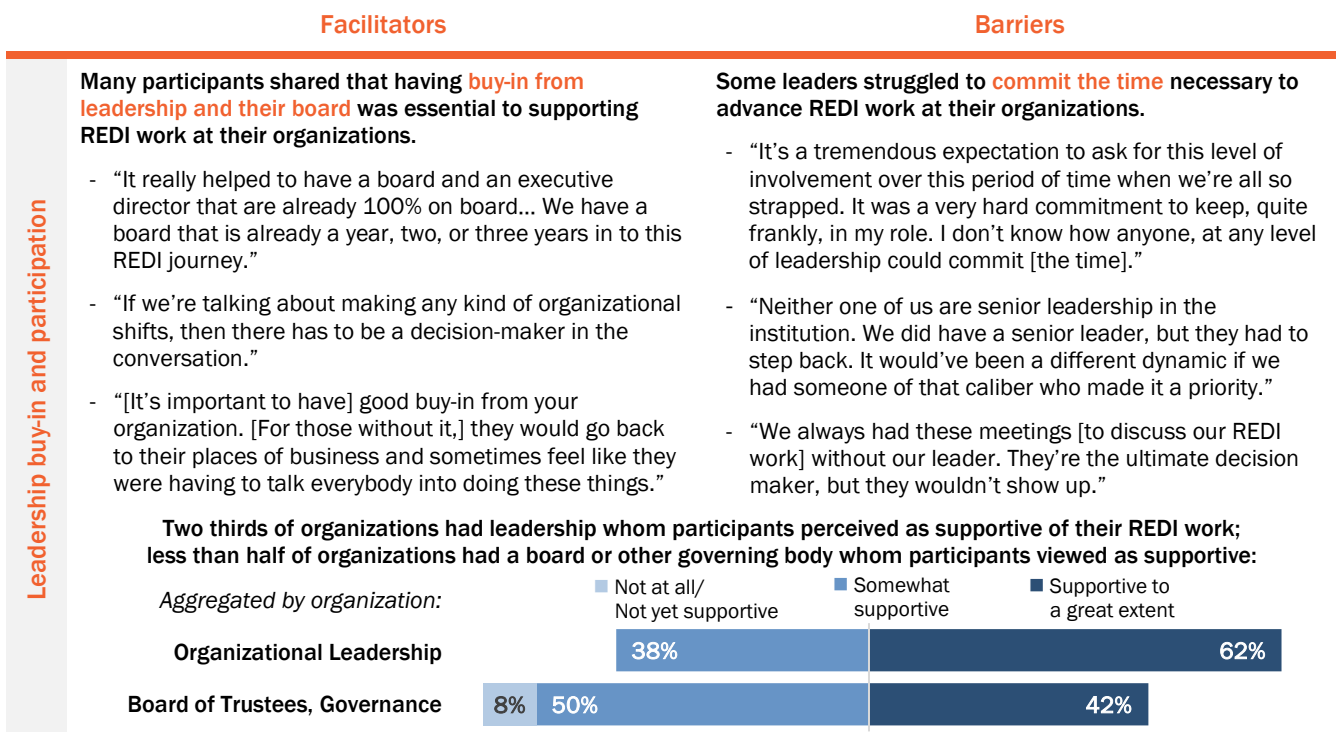
While it is not possible to fully link these activities to CoP participation (as opposed to, for example, other REDI activities within organizations), participants' reflections noted that involvement in the CoP was a key factor that allowed them to make progress towards REDI goals.

Lastly, not all organizations reported making progress on all their REDI goals. Some reported that the more aspirational goals were still a work in progress at the conclusion of the CoP, while others experienced some contextual barriers that prevented them from advancing their goals. These facilitators and barriers are described in more detail below.

Facilitators and Barriers to Progress

The evaluation surfaced insights about what facilitated organizational progress on equity goals and what got in the way. Exhibit 3 presents factors that emerged as facilitators and barriers to advancing REDI goals through our survey and interview data. These findings highlighted the importance of leadership and staff participation as well as having an intentional and committed approach to equity work when joining a REDI CoP.

Exhibit 3. Organizational Facilitators and Barriers to Advancing REDI Work



Facilitators

Barriers

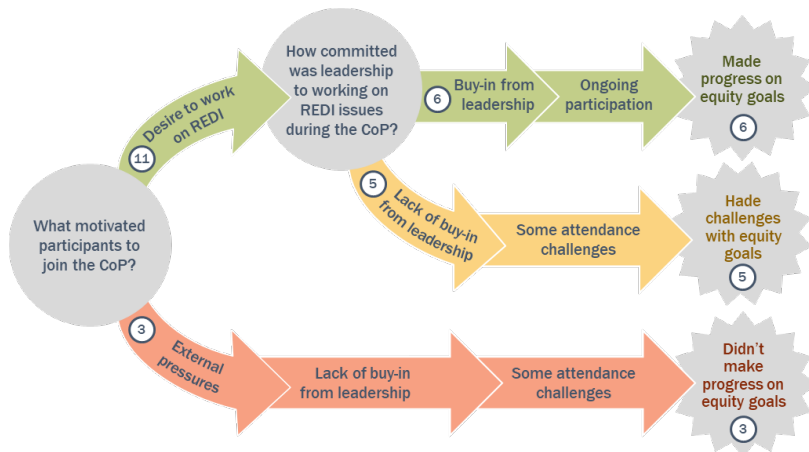
	Facilitators	Barriers
Staff participation	<p>Some participants described how staff members can play an integral role in advancing equity work and translating concepts into practice at their organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “A hundred percent, senior leadership needs to be at the table doing this. On the flip side, I will say that it’s probably very good to have other people going back and forth doing the work at the table because they are a little bit closer to the work.” - “[One other team member] and I have come back and reported at all [of our] staff meetings on what we’re learning in the COP... [The other team member, in particular, has helped bring concepts back] because they’ve been in the COP for its entire duration, and because of the nature of their role.” 	<p>Some participants noted that staff turnover in their organizations made it difficult to consistently participate and maintain momentum in this work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “The timing of this community of practice was really unfortunate. We were in such turmoil. So many people left organizations... Our ship was just dwindling away—we were four and then we were three and then we were two. The amount of institutional change going on at the same time, it was really hard for me to balance being there.” - “We’re hiring and moving into the next phase of our organization... Things shifted and changed [during the CoP]. We remain committed to it, and we’ll see some purposeful focus over the next few months as particularly this new hiring starts and reorganization is in motion.”
Organizational commitment	<p>Participants who reported making an explicit organizational commitment to REDI before joining the CoP felt they were able to make more progress on their equity goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “We were really walking the walk. We are really trying to be as diverse as we can possibly be both in our own employment, in our membership, in the communities we serve, and the whole strategy of our organization.” - “We had been doing surveys and getting some good feedback on our next steps... It was perfect timing for us to say, ‘Okay, here are these things we’ve done. Now let’s look to others’ in the community and let’s get a louder voice.” 	<p>A few participants reported that they participated only because they felt other pressures to participate, such as being called out publicly or feeling they could not turn down an offer from a funder.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “We were very publicly called out post George Floyd... My perception was that our participation was to say, ‘Look how much we care’ [rather than actually wanting to authentically engage in REDI work].” - “Any time a funder is leading a process like this, how on earth will we tell them we don’t prioritize equity and that we won’t participate? You can’t.”
Intentional approach	<p>Participants reported making more progress on their equity work when they had intentional processes for incorporating what they are learning from the CoP.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “What we learned allowed us to put those strategies in place for certain pockets of work where we were a little bit weaker. We are so fortunate that maybe some of the challenges that other organizations face we didn’t have to.” - “I’m bringing back learnings, activities, and resources. I’m on the internal DEI group so after every session, I always give them an overview of what we talked about, and then, where appropriate, share any resources [from the CoP].” 	<p>Some participants described having limited capacity and resources to bring back CoP learnings to their full teams.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “We never got together as a staff for a lunch and learn like, this is what we’re doing with three hours of our week. It would’ve been really more positive for us, If we had all shared what we were doing, but we weren’t really given the opportunity to share what we were doing in a positive light. It was more of like, this is a time suck.” - “I don’t know that I have informed [our organization’s] actions necessarily. I don’t know that I’ve taken anything from the community of practice to help change what’s happening institutionally here.”

Readiness to Make Progress in an Equity-Focused CoP: A Working Hypothesis

Understanding conditions that make organizations more likely to make progress toward equity goals in the context of a community of practice can be helpful. Findings from this evaluation highlighted two critical factors in this regard: motivation to participate and leadership buy-in and engagement.

Exhibit 4 translates these into a working hypothesis about what progress might look like based on these conditions. Based on our interviews and survey data, we categorized each of the 14 participating organizations along the pathways highlighted in Exhibit 4 to generate this working hypothesis. Of the 14 organizations in the CoP, the first important factor in an organization’s ability to make progress on its equity goals was participants’ **motivation** for joining the CoP. Those who came into the CoP with a clear organizational commitment to work on REDI issues were more likely to make progress on their equity goals. Participants who were volunteered to join the CoP without further direction from leadership or who joined after their organization was publicly called out about equity issues reported more difficulty making progress on equity work.

Exhibit 4. Working Hypothesis of Organizational Readiness for Change



In addition to motivation, organizations that reported making progress on their equity goals also tended to have more **buy-in and engagement from leadership** through the CoP. This was often related with ongoing participation in CoP meetings throughout the 18-month period. Additional research is needed to validate this hypothesis and determine if it is predictive across different contexts.

The Challenges in Taking Collective Action

In addition to helping organizations advance their organizational REDI goals, the Kauffman Foundation also hoped that the CoP would catalyze collective action on equity issues across organizations. However, because “designing for equity” is messy, non-linear (i.e., continuous iterations of “see-act-engage” in the Liberatory Design), and requires adoption of new modes and mindsets, moving toward collective action can be challenging.⁴

Barriers and Facilitators to Collective Action

The complex nature of equity work and the urgency to see movement and “progress” was a tension held by CoP participants. However, the evaluation revealed several important lessons about what is needed to nurture and support collective efforts in an equity-focused CoP.

Ambiguity and concerns over what is possible led to mixed levels of commitment.

As participating organizations learned about each other’s equity issues and unpacked broader systemic inequities in Kansas City, they began to explore their role as a collective with support from NEP. Several organizations developed a desire to act collectively, but, during interviews, participants shared that they had different ideas for what to work on. Some were also questioning how their organizations could best contribute and work across sectors. Toward the end of the 18 months, there was an attempt to create a public statement that declared participating organizations’ individual and collective commitments. However, ambiguity around collective action led to what participants perceived as mixed levels of commitment. One participant shared, “I am a bit concerned that the group will want to push forward on a policy piece that we aren’t able to engage in [because of limited resources].” Others were worried that a formal statement would require more than they could offer in terms of capacity: “I would hate to be one of those that signs off on a statement or public declaration saying we’re going to commit and then six months down the road, we’re on that list [with people saying], ‘Where are they now? They’ve committed to this and what have they done?’ because we do not have the resources to do any of that. Then I don’t want to be shamed for not signing off, too.” A Kauffman Foundation staff member similarly reflected that, even with the best intentions, the group may have gotten caught up in the challenge of finding ways to collectively make an impact: “We kept looking for what’s this magic way of making collective impact, and we got a bit stuck there because we couldn’t figure that out, but the desire is still there.”

Several organizations looked to the Foundation to play a more prominent role in helping to coalesce and support collective action.

As organizations struggled to coalesce around a common goal, several organizations expressed wanting the Kauffman Foundation to step up and provide more leadership, especially as the 18-month period was coming to an end. One

“The most challenging thing about this Community of Practice is no one person is assigned responsibility for making movement.”

- CoP participant

“All organizations could have had more skin the game, not forcing, but saying ‘Here’s why we are here. We collectively are saying that we’re going to continue these conversations because that is the outcome that were seeking to find, and this is what we’re going to do when things feel challenging.’”

- CoP participant

⁴ National Equity Project’s Liberatory Design Framework is new. This evaluation was one of the first opportunities to examine how this design approach can advance collective learning and equity goals at multiple levels (individual-organizational-collective/systems) within a CoP.

shared that the Foundation, “should have been the ones that get us over the hump to the action” as the group was struggling to reach consensus for collective action. Several hoped that the Foundation would continue to support this group and not lose momentum. Some participants questioned both who would continue to resource the CoP and who would facilitate it. One participant revealed, “I’m a little concerned...Who’s going to lead that? Who’s going to keep us all on track? It would be sad to me if, since we’ve gotten to this place with this thinking about a community statement...if it got put off until February of next year. I just don’t know how it’s going to work unless someone has the time and says, ‘Hey, we’re going to lead this, and facilitate it.’” At the same time, several Kauffman Foundation staff felt that to successfully move toward collective action, leaders from the participating organizations, who have more power to influence change, needed to be more engaged. As one Foundation staff shared, “Part of it was that decision-makers from organizations were not necessarily in the room. We could come up with ideas, but people may or may not have the authority to move on those things. Including Kauffman...There wasn’t really an organizational sponsor. Even though we’re all on the team, but that person that is championing and coordinating and making sure that things are aligned and moving. That partially contributed to why we didn’t maximize our participation.”

For some organizations, it was sufficient to make progress on their organizational equity goals and build relationships, while others felt more could have been accomplished with a realistic time horizon.

Several organizations shared how the learning, networking, and tools they gained through the CoP advanced their equity work and allowed them to apply these back to their organizations. The relationships built among organizations,

“The positive part to me is, if we’re all a little smarter as organizations and have incrementally improved our thinking...then all these organizations are better at thinking and working in this area. To me it feels really hard to find one or two things that the whole group is supposed to go do now”

- CoP participant

who were able to connect and learn about difficult issues, was a critical stepping stone for future collaborative work. While the CoP did not identify a particular initiative or project, some participants reflected that the network that was created has potential for collective efforts in the future. As one participant reflected, “Maybe the real goal deep down was to develop these relationships and recognize this is going to be a more sustainable long-term thing and we now have some critical mass in the community for a lot of these things.” Others questioned how realistic it would be to try to push for organizational and collective action in this timeframe. One participant explained this potentially unrealistic expectation, “It felt like there were two separate objectives...One being that there should be an internal organizational journey...and secondly, because we’re

bringing together all these incredible different people, that they too could work together now as empowered people to drive some broader change in the community. Both of those are a lot of goals. I’m not sure you’re going to be able to accomplish them at the same time.”

Despite not coalescing around collective goals, CoP participants developed collective modes and mindsets that form the foundation for designing for equity at the community level.

Equity work is complex and multi-faceted. As the liberatory model suggests, it requires continuous iteration of “seeing-engaging-acting,” while intentionally using new modes and mindsets. The members of this CoP came in at different phases in their equity process, both at the individual level and organizational level. The group discussed the history of oppression in KC, had conversations about racial tensions in their community, and were vulnerable by sharing their personal experiences. NEP supported this group to tap into new modes and mindsets that are critical in designing for equity. This included building comfort and skill in having difficult conversations. “We had sustained, serious, direct conversations about racism and that you cannot underestimate the power of that practice,” shared one participant. Several participants also demonstrated the ability to “see the system” more clearly. One described, “It really helped us think about how do we fit into this ecosystem and

“What was valuable was being able to hear what other organizations are doing and how they’re improving or even hearing where they’re having challenges and just seeing people be vulnerable and reach out and want to actually talk about the issues they’re facing within their organization.”

- CoP participant

how does our work intersect? How could it intersect, and how does what we do really impact what you're trying to do, thinking at that systems level.”

As shown in Exhibit 4, the vast majority (97%) of survey participants reported that through the CoP they were learning about how equity challenges impact individuals and communities, 74% said that they engaged in collective sense-making to understand the history of oppression, 97% noted they shared more openly and listened authentically to others in the CoP, and 94% shared that they engaged in difficult and uncomfortable conversations. And while survey data showed lower agreement on defining collective equity challenges and developing specific ideas, the data demonstrates that participants were putting into place values and practices that generate self-awareness of what perpetuates inequity and recognize oppression in how they live and work.

Exhibit 4. How Participants used Liberatory Mindsets within the CoP



Note: Rows may not sum to total due to rounding.

The Foundation's Role in Supporting the CoP

Through the CoP, the Kauffman Foundation positioned itself as a co-learner alongside participating organizations. While the foundation's participation was important for collective learning and relationship building, it also presented tensions regarding leadership expectations and funder-grantee power dynamics.

Opportunities and Challenges with the Funder's Participation in the CoP

Kauffman Foundation's participation provided an inside look at how the funder was addressing equity issues, fostering trust with grantee organizations.

CoP participants reported that the Foundation's participation allowed organizations to get to know the funder in a different way. A few participants mentioned learning about the Foundation's own vulnerabilities and struggles with equity work during small group conversations. The CoP created space for the funder and grantees to discuss topics they would otherwise not be able to touch on, which participants noted helped to build trust. Some participants also reflected that having this joint space with the Foundation helped them to see the "human side" of the Foundation. As one participant shared, "It was interesting to see them come and engage in the work we did...be more of a human than this funder that you can't reach or touch." Several interview participants from various organizations noted they felt comfortable having deep conversations with Foundation staff members and did not fear repercussion for what they were sharing in the CoP space. For example, one participant reflected: "I was very open and honest with [Foundation staff]. It wasn't going to come back on us that, 'Hey, we're a funder and you said something we didn't like, so this may mess with funding next time'. That's a credit to Kauffman for convening this group and maybe taking a step back and letting the work happen."

"[Kauffman staff] were really very nice people and, as a consequence of the types of breakouts we had, you got to know them a little bit. They even shared some things they were struggling with...so there was a lot of trust."

- CoP participant

A few organizations felt that the funder-grantee power dynamic limited authentic participation.

Staff members from a few organizations noted that the presence of Kauffman Foundation staff in the CoP created a sense of pressure. While the CoP was introduced as a "safe space," a few organizations felt it was difficult to engage transparently in conversations with Foundation staff. A few shared how they did not want to jeopardize their funding relationship and felt pressure to represent their organizations in the best light. One participant mentioned how uncomfortable it was to share this space with a funder, noting, "It's supposed to be a safe space, but I'm like, 'This is weird.' They're giving us money to be here, but they're part of it, too." One participant wondered if it would have been better if Foundation staff engaged in their own internal CoP first to then share those lessons with the grantee cohort, rather than participating alongside them.

The Foundation held a de facto leadership role as the sponsoring organization for the CoP; however, several organizations felt their leadership potential was limited in providing clarity and support for the work.

While the Foundation viewed itself as a co-learner, they were inevitably perceived as a leader in the CoP by participating organizations. The Foundation convened the organizations, provided funding to participate, and determined parameters

like timing, facilitation, and evaluation. As previously mentioned, some participants hoped that the Foundation would play a more prominent role in collective action. Several participants had additional expectations, such as wanting more guidance and direction from the Foundation, specifically in setting a clearer trajectory, goals, and outcomes for the work. Others were unclear how to use the funding provided by the foundation to engage in the CoP, noting, “We have received funding from the Kauffman Foundation related to this effort with absolutely no direction about what that funding is for or what it could be used for, or how it could be used.” Finally, a few organizations hoped to have more external support from the Foundation, such as being a “cheerleader” for their work and protecting them as they take risks in their organizations or investing in promising ideas. This was especially true for those organizations who did not have sufficient support from their own leadership.

“There was room to lead by example as in, ‘This is why Kauffman is doing this work. This is what got us to this point. There is where we’re headed, and this is what we are prepared to do as a result of this work.’”

- CoP participant

While communities of practice have been well researched in other settings and sectors, many assumptions remain about what it takes to effectively implement a CoP. Below are some common myths that came to light during the course of the evaluation.⁵

Communities of Practice Myths

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, social learning theorists known for their seminal work in communities of practice, state that there is no “one-size fits all approach” for this collective learning practice. Below are some top myths that are important to consider when hosting a community of practice and relevant to lessons surfaced in the REDI KC CoP.

1. **Communities of practice are always self-organizing.** *False.* While some communities can self-organize effectively, most need cultivation to ensure that members get high value for their participation.
2. **There are no leaders in a true community of practice.** *Mostly false.* Communities of practice require leaders, coordinators, or stewards to make decisions, set conditions, have strategic conversations about the direction of the community. Not all members see value in participating in these practices.
3. **The role of a community of practice is to share existing knowledge.** *Partially true.* While knowledge sharing is important, CoPs also innovate and solve problems, create new knowledge, and develop a collective and strategic voice.
4. **It is too difficult to measure the impact of communities of practice.** *Mostly false.* While you may not be able to attribute 100% causality of community of practice to outcomes, you can use a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures to track how participants are shifting practice and performance.
5. **Good facilitation is all it takes to get members to participate.** *False.* While skilled facilitation is important, there are many reasons why members may not engage well. The domain of interest needs to be relevant, the value of participation needs to be recognized by the organization, and members need to see that they will get something out of it. Good facilitators can help make this visible, but it is not the main reason people participate.
6. **Communities of practice are harmonious places.** *Maybe.* If they are totally conflict free, group think may be settling in or voices are being silenced. It is important for differences to be discussable and that they contribute to learning.

⁵ Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of its concepts and its uses. [Brief introduction to communities of practice.](#)

Summary and Recommendations

Through participation in the REDI KC CoP, individuals and organizations reported shifting their mindsets in ways that better positioned them to engage in and make progress on equity goals. Most participants also valued having a space for reflection, learning, and networking with other KC organizations. Several factors facilitated individuals' and organizations' ability to integrate the concepts discussed in the CoP, such as having support from organizational leadership and other staff members and having an organizational commitment to equity prior to joining the CoP. On the other hand, some participants reported barriers to integrating CoP concepts, such as staff turnover and limited organizational capacity and resources to integrate and act upon the concepts discussed in the CoP. These reflections suggest that certain factors could indicate whether organizations are ready to fully engage in and get the most out of a racial equity-focused CoP such as this one.

As the CoP progressed and focused more on moving to action, some tensions arose. While there was momentum to work towards collective action, it was not always clear to participants what shared goals around collective action would make sense and, even if there was agreement upon shared goals, who would lead the charge in working towards them. Organizations also faced varying constraints that made agreeing upon a shared set of goals challenging. Lastly, some participants noted finding great value in having the Kauffman Foundation participate in the CoP alongside other KC organizations, while others reflected that more leadership and guidance from the Foundation would have been helpful to work towards collective action.

Recommendations for Supporting a Racial Equity Community of Practice

These findings yield several recommendations of interest to the Kauffman Foundation and other funders and capacity-building organizations interested or engaging in equity-focused CoPs.

- **Consider readiness factors when doing outreach.** Organizations that had a clear commitment to advancing equity, buy-in from leadership, sufficient support (capacity and resources) to apply learning back to their organizations, and who were able to maintain consistent attendance over the course of the CoP, showed more promise in advancing their REDI goals. Assessing these factors during the outreach phase can help to ensure maximum participation and progress.
- **Clarify leadership.** While NEP provided the framework and tools, facilitated conversations, and provided coaching, the evaluation findings suggest that the CoP would have benefited from a leading entity to guide group decisions, coordinate partners, and facilitate strategic conversations to lead toward collective action. It would be helpful for funders (and other types of CoP hosts) to take on this leadership role or actively cultivate leaders among participating organizations over time. Being clear about roles from the start may also mitigate uncomfortable funder-grantee power dynamics.
- **Be realistic in setting organizational and collective REDI goals.** While most participating organizations had a clearer sense of working toward organizational REDI goals, there was less clarity around what type of collective goals the CoP could work on. Recognizing that equity work requires embracing complexity and continuous iteration of “see-engage-act,” expecting anything beyond organizational shifts may not have been realistic for an 18-month process. Funders and REDI CoP facilitators can set expectations early on about what capacities (i.e., modes, mindsets) may be nurtured over the course of 18 months that would set the foundation for longer-term collaboration and collective action. Additionally, a CoP centered on equity may benefit from creating shared goals with participating organizations from the start to strengthen participant ownership of the process.
- **Plan for turnover and limited organizational capacity.** Staff turnover was common across participating organizations. While the CoP facilitators and funder or host may not be able to predict turnover, they can prepare for how to support new incoming members (e.g., an orientation meeting that includes an overview of

CoP, goals, documentation on the efforts so far). Additionally, preparing the leads of participating organizations on how to bring in new members from their organization would be helpful. This can include having resources to assist with outreach in their respective organizations.

- **Gauging overall pace, structure, and format of the CoP.** Tracking participation and engagement can help assess the need to revisit the existing structure of the CoP. Recognizing that senior organizational leaders in particular have competing demands, what other structures can be put in place to maximize their participation? In addition to virtual sessions, are there other engagement opportunities or content that could be offered in case participants are unable to fully attend each CoP session? Asking for ongoing feedback from participants about when, how, and how long sessions are held may surface practical and innovative solutions that again can bring more ownership of the overall learning experience.
- **REDI facilitation and framework.** The participating organizations appreciated and embraced National Equity Project's Liberatory Design framework. Racial equity work requires a guiding framework that considers the complexity and iterative nature of transformative change, and NEP's approach to understanding the barriers and facilitators of designing for equity at multiple levels resonated with individuals. Funders looking to convene a racial equity CoP should consider bringing in external facilitators who have expertise in equity-focused leadership development and systems change.

Concluding Thoughts

The type of joint racial equity work accomplished through this CoP is not linear, straightforward, or free from challenges. However, over time, it has the potential to be transformative – for individuals, organizations, communities, and the systems within which they operate. The hope is that the lessons from this evaluation can help to support other similar racial equity-focused CoPs in achieving transformative change. Designing for equity requires adoption of new mindsets and modes of practice. The CoP provided the foundation for these new skills to be developed and fostered new relationships among KC organizations as individual organizations continued to advance their equity goals.