
Theory of Aligned Contributions

An Emerging Theory of Change Primer

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Theory Overview	2
Purpose	2
Illustration of the Theory of Aligned Contributions.....	4
Supporting Assumptions	4
Theory Elements.....	5
A Focus on a Single, Measurable Population Result	5
Urgency and Public Accountability.....	6
Leaders with A Collaborative Skill Set	7
The Four Quadrants of Aligned Contributions	8
The Practice.....	10
The Call to Action	10
The Container	11
The Capacity to Collaborate	11
Implementation Examples	12
Local Performance Partnership Summit Program	12
The Leadership in Action Program.....	13
Next Steps in Development and Research	16

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Introduction

“The synergy that accompanies alignment enables teams to do seemingly impossible things . . . developing alignment through purpose and vision.”¹

Dalton Sherman’s keynote address electrified the attendees at the Back to School Convocation in Dallas, Texas. The ten year old challenged the audience of more than 20,000 administrators, teachers, and support staff to answer the questions--

“Do you believe in me . . . Do you believe that all 157,000 students in Dallas can leave high school ready for college or the workplace?”

Do you believe that every single one of us can graduate ready for college or the workplace?

You better. Because next week, we’re all showing up in your schools – all 157,000 of us – and what we need from you is to believe that we can reach our highest potential.”²



The standing ovation was a full-throated “yes” that rocked the convention center.

Who would disagree with the result that all students should leave school ready to take their next step in life? In fact, a myriad of programs—tutoring, mentoring, internships, enrichment, and remedial—have been implemented to contribute to this result. Yet, in the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) as in many rural, urban and suburban communities, large numbers of students graduate with a substandard knowledge base and lack of marketable skills. The following report in

¹ Oakley and Krug, *Enlightened Leadership: Getting to the Heart of Change*, 1991.

² Watch Dalton Sherman’s video on YouTube

the October 8, 2008 Dallas News describes the gap between the desired result that all students in Dallas can graduate ready for college or the workplace and the current reality:

DISD students traditionally lag behind others in the state. But black students in DISD also lag behind their peers in the district. Preliminary results for the 2008 TAKS exams show that DISD's black students scored below white and Hispanic students in all areas -- reading, math, writing, science and social studies. In math, 60.5 percent of black students passed the exam, while 72.8 percent of Hispanic students and 83.9 percent of white students passed.³

This gap between a desired result and reality is not unique to education but is a phenomenon noted for other complex conditions such as babies born healthy or ex-offenders integrating successfully into the community.

With so many people contributing their hard work and millions of dollars, why are things not better? Why is a call to action, even one as powerful as Dalton Sherman's, not sufficient to align all these contributions?

Theory Overview

Purpose

The Theory of Aligned Contributions attempts to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions needed to bridge the gap between desired results and current reality in complex adaptive systems. It posits that population level changes are most likely to occur if a core group of multi-sector, cross-agency leaders not only respond to a call to action, but also take aligned actions at scope and scale towards a result.

³ Hobbs, Tawnell, Dallas News, October 10, 2008,

Without alignment of actions the quest for change is just business as usual.

The Theory of Aligned Contributions is both descriptive and predictive about how leaders move from talk to action to produce better results. It predicts the acceleration of population results⁴ when leaders from multiple sectors equipped with specific skills and a sense of heightened urgency:

- Make an unequivocal commitment to be publicly accountable for a result for a specific population: and,
- Work together to take aligned actions to contribute at a scope and scale sufficient to make measurable progress and towards the result.

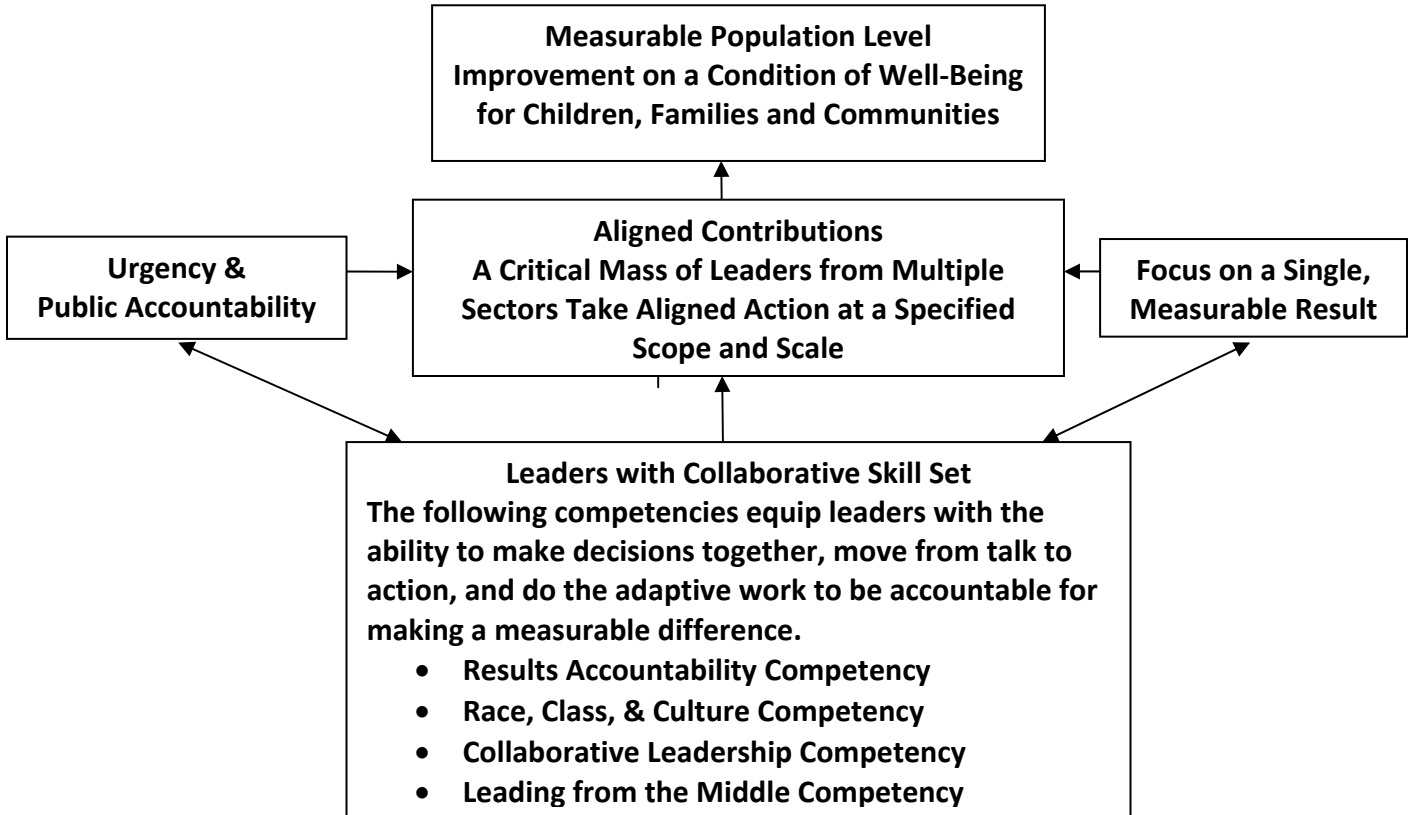
Developed over the past twenty years, it predicts the behaviors of leaders across organizational and sectoral boundaries that contribute to better results.

Leaders often work within individual agencies, organizations or systems creating targeted programs designed to address specific aspects of a problem. However, population level changes cannot be made by a single program or agency.⁵ In light of this, many organizations have developed collaborative groups of multi-sector leaders. Despite these efforts, the work often remains siloed. The Theory of Aligned Contributions contends that it is more likely that measurable population level change will occur, when a critical mass of leaders use specific skills to align their actions and make contributions to a specific result. The following is an illustration of the theory that maps the relationship between specific conditions and the result. Read from the bottom to the top, it illustrates the foundational support or preconditions required to achieve a population result.

⁴ The definition of population level results is derived from Mark Friedman's Results Accountability Framework. Friedman, Mark, *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough*, 2005.

⁵ Ibid

Illustration of the Theory of Aligned Contributions



Supporting Assumptions

The following set of assumptions underpins the logic of the Theory of Aligned Contributions as a plausible change process for leaders:

- Population level changes cannot be made by a single agency or organization but must be part of a multi-sector, public and private movement to achieve a given result.⁶
- Outcomes for children, families and communities are unsatisfactory in part because key stakeholders are engaged in unaligned action on multiple results or no specific identified result.
- Leaders lack a sense of urgency to take action because of the seemingly intractable nature of problems, social conditions, systems and challenges.

⁶ Shorr, Lisabeth, *Common Purpose*, 1997.

- Public accountability can increase urgency and create a personal sense of accountability for taking action and making an aligned contribution.
- Actions to “tip” the odds that good things will happen can be generated by a small group of people with a common purpose, connected relationships and a sense of urgency.⁷
- Leaders given “permission” to engage in action learning⁸ with a sense of urgency can use the depth of their experience and wisdom to galvanize change and forward movement.
- Leaders can be equipped to “tackle the toughest problems and do the adaptive work”⁹ necessary to achieve progress through their commitment to taking aligned actions and leveraging current relationships and resources.

Theory Elements

A Focus on a Single, Measurable Population Result

A clearly defined population is identified. The result for that population is stated in plain language that is easily understood. Information is provided on the number of people representing the result within specific geographic boundaries. This information is critical to determine the scope and scale needed to make a measurable difference.

An indicator to measure “what success looks like” for the population is selected. The indicator selected meets the three criteria of effective communication, relevance to the desired change, and availability of data.¹⁰ The indicator is displayed as a trend line that includes a baseline and forecast of desired or expected direction that the curve will turn given the successful implementation of strategies.

⁷ Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. 2002

⁸ Argyris, Chris, *On Organizational Learning*, 1997.

⁹ Heifetz, Ronal A., & Linsky, Martin, *Leadership on the Line*, 2002.

¹⁰ Friedman, Mark, 2005.

A focus on a common population result is created. Mark Friedman's results accountability framework,¹¹ is a disciplined way of thinking that moves from ends (results) to means (strategies and actions). Beginning with the result, a sense of common purpose is born and creates a forward energy that captivates leaders and is the point of initiation into the work. It provides a platform that over time scaffolds leaders' commitment from a narrower agency focus to a results focus for a whole population. It is best captured in the following statements from leaders who participated in a state level project that used the Theory of Aligned Contributions as its theory of change.

"This letting go {of a narrow agency perspective} created an openness that allowed participants to forge new relationships and strengthen old ones."

Another said, "It really has been a pretty amazing process to watch people who used to compete for the same dollars use those same dollars to do a kind of statewide blanket to protect early childhood."

Urgency and Public Accountability

The current condition is made visible and emotionally accessible to leaders. The visceral reactions of surprise, compassion, dismay, dissatisfaction, and sometimes outrage, upon realizing and seeing the state of children, families and communities create urgency. Population level data including graphs in the form of trend lines, bar charts and pie charts as well as pictures and geomaps make the current condition visible and accessible. Disaggregated data further illuminates the current condition by providing information about race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, geographical districts, special needs populations and other descriptive data relevant to the problem. It is posited that the creation of a "situation room" that vividly depicts the reality and some of the territory will increase leaders' sense of urgency.

¹¹ *ibid*

Leaders publicly commit to hold themselves accountable for accelerating progress in a single measurement period. The leaders commit to meet frequently enough to define action, align action, take action and determine whether actions are effective contributions to progress towards the result. Overtime leaders use information to course-correct, address barriers and ensure measurable progress within the single measurement period. The sense of immediacy, public accountability, and personal commitment creates a healthy tension that accelerates leaders taking action.

Leaders with a Collaborative Skill Set

The following are the four leadership competencies deemed necessary to enable leaders to make aligned contributions to improve results:

- Results-based Accountability Competency-the ability to use a disciplined 7-step process to take immediate action that contributes to measurable improvement in the result relying primarily on low cost/no cost options.
- Race, Class, & Culture Competency-the ability to engage in constructive dialogue about race, class and culture that enables leaders to take action to address disparities.
- Collaborative Leadership Competency-the ability to make decisions and take action together in service of the result.
- Leading from the Middle Competency-the ability to enroll those you are accountable to and those you hold accountable to implement strategies that work.

Developing these competencies requires space, time on task, and support. A setting allowing experimentation, learning, trust building and risk taking is needed for leaders to do the hard work of practicing the new behaviors and skills. In this neutral and supportive environment, leaders can build the individual and collective capacities necessary to resolve conflict, make decisions that stick, form relationships, and engage in authentic conversations.

This setting is a container conducive to collaborative work focused on the task of making aligned contributions. The container supports the work by ensuring that data is displayed and easily accessible, immediate in-hand documentation of problem solving and decision-making is provided, facilitated action learning opportunities are offered, and tools for making and keep commitments to action at the person, role, and system level¹² are introduced and practiced.

The Four Quadrants of Aligned Contributions

When a critical mass of leaders from different sectors come together and make an unequivocal commitment to take aligned actions they accelerate improvement in the well being of their communities. Aligned actions become aligned contributions when individuals within organizations and communities take actions that complement, support, leverage or correlate with actions that are occurring in other organizations, communities or systems at a scope and scale necessary to make a measurable improvement in a population level result. Human service organizations, agencies and communities are complex adaptive systems ¹³ defined by interdependent individual behaviors and emergent system-wide patterns of behavior; making it challenging but not impossible to work within and across overlapping systems. To do this work and make aligned contributions, leaders use the leadership competencies described above to make collective decisions and act in service of a common result.

Leaders create collaborative work out of the power and experience of their separate work. As they come together, some leaders may be highly active contributors to the common purpose and some may not. Some may be highly competent at aligning with others, and some may not. These two axes of leadership choice—high or low action, and high or low alignment—create four quadrants that illuminate the possibilities of

¹² William Ryan, Jan Jaffe, Grantcraft, Personal Strategy, 2005.

¹³ Eoyang, Glenda H. and Berkas, Thomas H, "Evaluating Performance in a Complex Adaptive System" in Lissack, M. and Gund, H., eds., *Managing Complexity in Organizations* (Westport, Connecticut; Quorum Books, 1998), 2-13.

how individuals might pick-up their practice of leadership at a given time and place to create aligned action towards a common result.

The Four Quadrants of Aligned Action for Results

Takes actions that contribute to results	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of action that contributes to improved results • Does not work to be in alignment with others <p>(High action, low alignment)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High level of action that contributes to improved results • Works to be in alignment with others <p>(High action, high alignment)</p>
	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of action that does not contribute to improved results • Does not work to be in alignment with others <p>(Low action, low alignment)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of action that does not contribute to improved results • Works to be in alignment with others <p>(Low action, high alignment)</p>
		Low	High
Works to be in alignment with others			

In any group of leaders individuals may be in any one of the four quadrants at any moment. Leaders’ conscious or unconscious choice to be in any one of the four quadrants reflects their assumptions and perceptions about their opportunities to pick up their leadership at this time, with this group of leaders, and for this purpose. It may also reflect how they perceive themselves and their capacity to take aligned actions at the individual, relational, and collective level.¹⁴

The Theory of Aligned Contributions is operationally defined as having enough leaders choosing to engage at the level of high action and high

¹⁴ Day, David and Harrison, Michelle, “A multi-level, identity-based approach to leadership development”, *Human Resource Management Review*, 2007.

alignment at the same time for long enough to make a measurable improvement in a common result. The leadership development focus is on the behaviors, skills and capacities that create the awareness and opportunity for leaders to choose to move from any of the other three quadrants into high alignment and high action. The leaders through experience and reflection become aware of their assumptions about leading together to achieve results. From that awareness they are offered opportunities and skills to make choices about how to work together and then learn from the consequences of those choices.

As leaders practice these skills and behaviors and take aligned actions, they produce better results, build stronger relationships and create a virtuous cycle. In that cycle of moving from talk to aligned action, the power of accomplishment reinforces the leadership practices that can accelerate progress towards the common result. This approach is contingent upon leaders practicing a set of skills together while working towards a common purpose.

The Practice

In practice, the theory of aligned contributions is embedded in programs designed to make progress on a result. When successful, such programs catalyze a critical mass of leaders to move into high action and high alignment and make aligned contributions at a scope and scale to make a measurable difference in a population level result. The following describes how a program design integrates the elements of the theory through the call to action, the container, and the capacity to collaborate.

The Call to Action

The call to action is a mechanism designed to focus leaders on a single measurable result with urgency and public accountability for progress. The call to action is an invitation issued by a convening partnership of major community institutions to a larger group of multi-sector leaders.

The call to action occurs after the convening partnership agrees on the population, result, and indicator and has readily available indicator and population information. The call to action ignites a focus on a single measurable result, starts to generate urgency, and sets the framework for public accountability.

The Container

The container provides the space, time, materials, documentation of the work, and facilitation support needed for the invited leaders to come together and work. This container sustains the focus on the single measurable result, the urgency, and the public accountability. It is also an environment conducive to leaders working together and simultaneously enhancing their capacity to collaborate.

The container is a “situation room” where the elements of theory of aligned contributions are made visible and accessible. This setting, created by someone holding the role of project manager, provides an information rich experience within spatial and relational boundaries designed to help the leaders form into a work group with the task of making aligned contributions to a result.¹⁵ Group decisions and actions are documented by someone in a project assistant role to help groups remember key information, avoid repetitive conversations and to maintain forward movement.

The Capacity to Collaborate

The capacity to collaborate is developed through the action learning experiences that occur within the container after the call to action. The experience of using the competencies equips the leaders with a collaborative skill set. The collaborative skill set enhances their ability to listen, pay attention, and engage in conversations that allow them to choose to be accountable for the whole.¹⁶ The four competencies support engagement and exploration at the person, role, and system level. The action learning is supported by someone in a

¹⁵ Molenkamp, Rene, and Hayden, Charla, *Tavistock Premier, II*, 2002.

¹⁶ Block, Peter, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 2008.

coach/facilitator role, who is experienced¹⁷ and qualified¹⁸ to apply the theory of aligned contributions in the context of complex, adaptive group dynamics.

The capacity to collaborate grows as leaders use the competencies to move from any of the other three quadrants into the fourth quadrant of high alignment and high action. Actions are examined through reflection so group members learn from the consequences of their choices. Over time, as leaders work within the container and practice the competencies, connections are created that lead to aligned contributions at a scale great enough to make a measurable improvement in a population.

Implementation Examples

Implementations of the Theory of Aligned Contributions include the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center of the University of California at San Francisco's Local Performance Partnership Summits and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Leadership in Action Program (LAP) in partnership with the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Local Performance Partnership Summit Program

The Performance Partnership Summits at the national level built on the model of catalytic leadership¹⁹ originally used in the Oregon Option Partnership²⁰. The theory of aligned contributions guided the replication of the national model at the local level, and was supported by an NIH Small Business Innovation Research Grant.

¹⁷ Experienced in facilitating Results Accountability in complex adaptive systems, leadership coaching, and applying concepts of adaptive leadership.

¹⁸ Qualified in Results Based Facilitation™ and MBTI®

¹⁹ Jeffrey S. Luke, *Catalytic Leadership: Strategies for an Interconnected World*, 1997.

²⁰ Mark G. Popovich, *Toward Results-Oriented Intergovernmental Systems: An Historical Look at the Development of the Oregon Option, The Public's Work for The Alliance for Redesigning Government of the National Academy of Public Administration* July 1996

The program was implemented on a small scale in five California counties by three person summit implementation teams. The team members were local health professionals selected for their commitment and credibility as smoking cessation leaders. The teams attended a statewide leadership development workshop. At the workshop they practiced a set of collaborative leadership competencies and learned how to use an electronic tool kit to convene one day local Smoking Cessation Performance Partnership Summits. Technical assistance was also made available to the teams from the Smoking Cessation Leadership Center at the University of California at San Francisco.

The teams returned to their counties and issued a call to action to a small group of ten to twelve health leaders from different sectors. The call to action invited the leaders to focus on the result of smoking cessation, as measured by referrals to quit lines. Referrals to quit lines met the criteria of communication, proxy and data accessibility. The teams created a container consisting of a meeting environment and project management that provided the time, space, materials, and documentation for the Summit. The capacity to collaborate was supported by team member(s) in the role of a neutral facilitator using Results Based Facilitation²¹ methods. In that role, they used action-learning strategies to support the invited leaders in making decisions and committing to action. Preliminary evidence suggests that in three of the five counties the aligned contributions generated by the Performance Partnership Summit Action Plans may have contributed to sustaining or increasing the level of quit line referrals as compared to two counties that did not implement Summits.²²

The Leadership in Action Program

On a larger scale, the LAP is the most complete implementation of the theory of aligned contributions. The LAP is designed to implement the theory of aligned contributions with a group of up to forty leaders committed to a community wide population result, such as children

²¹ Pillsbury, Jolie Bain, *Results Based Facilitation Workbook V. 5.6*, 2008.

²² Pillsbury, Jolie and Pillsbury Robert, *A Teachable Method for Changing Unhealthy Behaviors*, SBIR Phase I, Final Report, 2008

entering school ready to learn or babies born healthy. In this application of the theory, the call to action and invitation to join the LAP comes from credible community leaders such as the mayor, school superintendent, and head of a community foundation. These leaders, during an engagement process with the Casey Foundation, become the Accountability Partner for the LAP. In that role they identify the population, result, indicator, and timeframe of the measurement period. They also make a commitment to provide the data and a forum for public accountability at the end of the measurement period. The indicators for population results such as children entering school ready to learn and babies born healthy meet the criteria of communication, proxy, and data accessibility. The Accountability Partner enters into an agreement with the Casey Foundation and the Academy to implement the LAP.

A four or five person LAP implementation team creates the container for the LAP. The project manager and project assistant on this team, supported by the Academy, provide a meeting environment with the data, materials, and documentation necessary to support the work of the forty LAP leaders. The leaders join together for two days every five to six weeks for fifteen months.

The capacity to collaborate is supported by two qualified and experienced members coach/facilitators²³ of the implementation team who offer action-learning opportunities to the leaders as they do their work. The leaders apply the four competencies in real time and have opportunities for reflective practice, coaching, and feedback to support their movement into high alignment and high levels of action contributing to the result.

At each LAP session, LAP leaders use the competencies to make connections with each other, understand the forces and factors that they

²³ The LAP coach/facilitators are qualified in RBF™ MBTI®, experienced and proficient in modeling and facilitating the application of the four competencies (results accountability, race, class, and culture dialogue, collaborative leadership, leading from the middle), and supporting the LAP leaders in their adaptive work.

can address with low cost/no cost solutions, resolve conflicts, address issues of power and authority, and take action informed by an understanding of the effects of race, class and culture on the result. Leaders commit to take action within their own organizations and spheres of influence. They work together as they develop the attitudes, behaviors, skills and knowledge to be accountable for taking action at the person, role, and system levels. Over the course of the LAP the capacity to make aligned contributions at scope and scale evolves as an emergent property of the LAP leaders collective capacity to collaborate.

Since 2002, thirteen LAPs have been implemented in four states. There is preliminary evidence that when implemented with fidelity, the call to action, the container, and the capacity to collaborate create conditions where leaders do make aligned contributions at scope and scale to improve a result.

For example, initial analysis suggests that the aligned contributions of the LAP leaders in Baltimore City, Maryland may have contributed to a measurable increase in children entering school ready to learn.²⁴ When interviewed about their experience, Baltimore LAP leaders articulated how applying the competencies enhanced their ability to make aligned contributions. For example, the following highlights the application of the results accountability competency.

“I think using data more directly, more specifically and in a more focused way ...integrated our work here...Our mission is always to look at where the gaps are in children entering school ready to learn with respect to geography or cohorts of youngsters. We started looking at the phenomena of the non-English speaking population of young children. Where are they located, and why was that gap the widest of any cohort? Nobody else was looking at what would be the tipping point to change that. So as an organization with my board, we adopted looking at the English language

²⁴ Pillsbury, Robert, *LAP Assessment*, Sherbrooke Consulting, Inc., 2007.

learner population as one of our priorities... So the data moved us into a {new} priority area.”²⁵

Next Steps in Development and Research

The Theory of Aligned Contributions is an emerging theory of change that has been used by both small and large-scale programs. Currently, another small-scale project is underway as an undergraduate course in the University of Maryland’s Leadership Academy created to turn the curve for a campus result related to sustainable communities. A robust and thorough Quality Improvement and Research Agenda is also underway for the LAP program that will test the assumptions and logic of the Theory of Aligned Contributions. In addition, pending funding, the Smoking Cessation Performance Partnership Summits will enter a second phase of implementation and research.

The emergence of this theoretical perspective on leadership development will provide interesting insights into the effort and outcome involved when leaders respond to the call to action, have a container for their leadership work, and develop the capacity to collaborate by applying the four leadership competencies to make aligned contributions that turn the curve on population results.

²⁵ The Impact of leadership development on Early Childhood Education, Annie E. Casey Foundation:
<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter.aspx>

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