Partner Up: The Role of Collaboration in Education

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Partner Up
The Role of Collaboration in Education

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by
Zachary Herrmann

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership.

May, 2017
Dedication

To family, friends, teachers, and students – past, present, and future.
Acknowledgements

I am the product of immeasurable love, encouragement, and support.

Thank you.
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Abstract

Individuals and organizations collaborate when they are unable to achieve their goals on their own. Considering the complex and ambitious goals of many education organizations, the education sector would appear ripe for collaboration. This capstone explores the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in collaboration between education organizations by focusing on district-university partnerships. District-university partnerships must navigate significant challenges, including differences in organizational culture, ways of working, theories of action, and goals. But these differences must not be viewed solely as challenges to overcome; they are also opportunities to be leveraged. Indeed, differences are precisely what lead to unique capabilities and perspectives: essential elements for effective collaboration.

District-university partnerships provide a complex context for leadership. Effective leaders must be able to cross organizational boundaries, work effectively in situations with little or ambiguous formal authority, create systems and structures where currently none exist, develop partnership goals and processes that can coexist with those of each partner organization, and lead a learning organization. To do so, leaders must draw upon expertise not only in education, but from other disciplines and processes as well, including negotiation, collaboration, and business.
Introduction

The Context

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-M) School of Education (SOE) entered their third year of Forward Madison: A collaboration for learning and leadership during the 2016-2017 school year. The partnership’s charge is to develop a strategy to grow, induct, and support new MMSD educators with a sharp focus on equity. From its onset, there have been high hopes for this partnership. As stated in the memorandum of agreement, “Through this work, we believe that a high quality workforce will be developed and retained which can significantly impact student achievement and narrow opportunity gaps” (Forward Madison MOA, 2016). Forward Madison has achieved exciting results in its first three years, and leaders of both organizations are committed to the long term sustainability and effectiveness of the collaboration.

Forward Madison was originally conceived by Julie Underwood, the now former UW-M SOE Dean, and Jennifer Cheatham, the current MMSD Superintendent, during Jennifer Cheatham’s first year in Madison. UW-M Chancellor Rebecca Blank demonstrated significant support for the collaboration by awarding the partnership a $1,200,000 gift during her second year as UW-M Chancellor, the largest single gift in the history of the Chancellor’s office. In addition, the CUNA Mutual Foundation, a foundation local to Madison, committed a total of $1,200,000 to the partnership over a 3 year period, the largest gift the foundation had ever granted MMSD. While leadership at the district has remained stable over the course of the partnership, Diana Hess is now in
her second year as Dean of the UW-M SOE.

With such strong and public support from the UW-M Chancellor, the UW-M SOE Dean, the MMSD Superintendent, and the CUNA Mutual Foundation, there were high hopes and high expectations to hit the ground running and make good on the promise to leverage each organization’s resources in service of the students of Madison. Now entering its third year, there are impressive accomplishments to show. The partnership has worked to create meaningful structures and programming to support MMSD educators. With the initial funding now coming to a close, the future of the partnership weighs heavily on everyone’s mind. What will be sustained? What will be transformed? What will be the future of Forward Madison?

Entry

My general interest in the relationship between higher education and k-12 school districts made MMSD a particularly compelling residency for me. MMSD senior leaders were eager to develop a plan for the partnership and a vision for its future, particularly given that they were entering their last year of funding from the CUNA Mutual Foundation and the UW-M Chancellor’s Office.

Building off of the Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA) on district-university partnerships that I completed during the prior spring and summer, I set forth to play a supporting role in helping the partnership plan for the future. Specifically, my task was to conduct an initial assessment of the partnership, work with key stakeholders to develop a sustainability plan, and present recommendations to the Forward Madison leadership team.
The Capstone

While the content of my work centered on a district-university partnership, my strategic project was actually about an outsider exercising leadership in an ambiguous and complex context with little formal authority. Consequently, this capstone attempts to capture and analyze the type of leadership required to achieve the task I set forth to achieve, which seemed to be a small part “district-university partnership” and a large part “leadership and negotiation.” Because of the unique leadership demands of district-university partnerships, I found that I needed far more than content knowledge in order to be successful. Beyond the differences that were easy to see and describe, strong cultural differences between the district and the university offered the Forward Madison partnership powerful opportunities as well as challenges. In such a context, I found that commitment among participants is more important than compliance, relationships can matter more than formal power, surface coordination is far easier than collaboration, and participants must constantly negotiate the balance between ideas and action.

As is the case with most accounts of district-university partnerships, cultural differences will take a leading role in this narrative. For the purposes of establishing a common understanding of culture, I will use the definition forwarded by Edgar Schein, an MIT professor and expert on organizational culture. Schein defines the culture of a group as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and international integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as a correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 2010, p.18).
While districts and universities may organize themselves around similar societal problems, my RKA suggests -- and my strategic project experience corroborates -- that these organizations can perceive, think, and feel differently in relation to those problems.

My initial theory of action articulated an intentional strategy to effectively diagnose the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the partnership in order to develop a compelling and powerful set of recommendations. Evidence suggests that my theory of action largely proved true; I was able to produce a powerful set of recommendations that resonated with most key stakeholders. However, what my initial theory of action failed to consider were actual levers for change. Even with powerful ideas, how does the change actually happen?

I realized that the leadership moves that helped produce insight into a promising direction could be very different than the leadership moves that help move a group in a promising direction. Viewing my work as what Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009b) call a “Leadership Laboratory,” I tested a new leadership strategy that involved designing thoughtful “interventions” (p. 125) in an attempt to make progress along key recommendations for the partnership.

This capstone begins with an RKA that describes a challenging context for leadership: a district-university partnership. Districts and universities often differ in culture, structure, organizational design, processes, hierarchies, and sometimes even values and beliefs. With that context in mind, we turn to the specifics of the Forward Madison partnership and the description of the strategic project. This section outlines the specific work I did, the evidence I collected, and my analysis of my work. Finally, the capstone ends with implications for self, site, and sector, followed by a conclusion.
A district-university partnership can be seen as an example of an especially complex and challenging context for leadership. Therefore, this capstone attempts to go beyond an exploration of effective district-university partnership leadership and towards an exploration of effective leadership in complex and ambiguous contexts where change is possible, even without formal authority.
Review of Knowledge for Action

MMSD and UW-M SOE are not the first to be drawn to the allure of a district-university partnership. According to Hora and Millar (2011) in their book, *A Guide to Building Education Partnerships: Navigating Diverse Cultural Contexts to Turn Challenge into Promise*, many districts and universities see partnership as a potential solution to challenges facing education. The United States’ low rankings on international standardized exams, troubled human capital system for recruiting, developing, and retaining highly effective educators, and differential access to college across various subgroups of students all represent significant and complex challenges (Hora & Millar, 2011). Since districts and universities have similar missions related to these problems, it seems natural that these institutions would at least see each other as friendly allies. But what about seeing each other as strategic partners? The demands of these challenges require more from the district-university relationship than friendship-at-a-distance.

Let us zoom into one of these problems: the human capital system. Districts and universities both represent a piece of the same pipeline for recruiting, developing, hiring, and supporting teachers and principals. A stronger connection between districts that hire and support teachers and principals and the universities that initially recruit and develop them could offer some coherence to the otherwise complex system -- a system that currently boasts over 2000 teacher education programs in this country (Dynarski, 2014).

The United States does not have a “teacher pipeline” per se, but rather an

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1 Matthew Hora is also a researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER), which is housed in the UW-M SOE.
antiquated plumbing system that is too confusing to understand, too inefficient to justify, and too ineffective to ignore. The limitations of our current system are well documented, and a full exploration of them is far beyond the scope of this RKA. Feiman-Nemser (2001) summarizes some of the pressing issues in “From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen Teaching:”

There is no connective tissue holding things together within or across the different phases of learning to teach.

The typical preservice program is a collection of unrelated courses and field experiences. Most induction programs have no curriculum, and mentoring is a highly individualistic process. Professional development consists of discrete and disconnected events. Nor do we have anything that resembles a coordinated system. Universities regard preservice preparation as their purview. Schools take responsibility for new teacher induction. Professional development is everybody’s and nobody's responsibility. (p. 1049)

If districts and universities both have an interest in recruiting and developing high quality teachers, should they not be a match made in heaven? While this relationship may seem intuitive in theory, successful examples are rare in practice.

This RKA attempts to summarize the knowledge needed to make district-university partnerships work, by answering the research question: How do universities and districts make their partnerships sustainable and effective? The remainder of this RKA is divided into three parts:

1. What is a district-university partnership and why pursue one?
2. Critical elements of a successful district university partnership
3. Theory of action that drives an effective and sustainable district-university partnership
What is a district-university partnership and why pursue one?

“Sustained partnerships have the potential to bridge the theory-practice divide. As the partners and stakeholders work together in a variety of teaching, research and professional development activities, they share their skills in a synergetic relationship in which theory is demonstrated in practice, and practice is refined and enriched by theory. The ongoing critical dialogue and collaboration among the partnership partners facilitates the integration of theory and practice.” (Brady, 2008, p. 30)

Within one passage, Brady (2008) captures an aspirational vision for district-university partnerships. Yet, how can we predict whether a given partnership will be able to deliver on these grand possibilities?

Hora and Millar (2011) recommend viewing partnerships as evolving organizations. Consequently, organizational theory can be used to understand the capabilities of a partnership. Business experts Christensen and Kaufman (2008) argue that an organization's capabilities, i.e. what an organization is able to achieve, is determined by three groups of factors: its resources, processes, and priorities.

Hora and Millar (2011) describe three different types of district-university partnerships based on their review of the literature. Each of these types relies on a different set of resources, processes, and priorities. The three types are:

- **Limited** - “in which one organization clearly directs the actions of others”
- **Coordinated** - “which involve horizontal coordination but not centralized governance”
- **Collaborative** - “in which partners are tightly coupled and employ a consensus-
Hora and Millar note that these three types lie on a continuum and acknowledge that there may be different structural types within a single partnership.

Hora and Miller’s (2011) collaborative partnerships are attractive because of the new capabilities they can develop. Barbara Gray (1989), a veteran mediator who writes about multi-party collaborations, argues that figuring out how to capitalize on differences rests at the heart of collaboration, and two organizations can jointly find solutions that broaden possibilities when they explore those differences. “The 3rd Space” is a term used by Hora and Millar (2011) to describe the new space for activity that can be created by a partnership. They write, “The 3rd space has strong potential as a learning environment because it invites, indeed requires, creativity and the application of diverse forms of knowledge to new problems” (p. 17). The ability to find solutions that extend beyond an organization’s own vision is compelling, particularly given the magnitude of the challenges districts and universities face.

It is also worthwhile to note that not all problems require partnerships, let alone collaborative ones. If problems are clearly defined, solutions and best practices exist, and the capabilities already rest within one organization, a partnership may not be needed. Alternatively, if coordination between two organizations will suffice, then a limited or coordinative partnership may be all that is needed.² Nevertheless, this RKA will pay...
particular attention to collaborative partnerships because of the powerful capabilities they have and how challenging they are to achieve.

While district-university partnerships might initially aspire to collaborate because of the attractive potential to solve complex problems, significant challenges frequently undermine their attempts. A review of the research reveals four main categories of challenges. First, cultural differences can lead to significant barriers to collaboration (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Gray, 1989; Hora & Millar, 2011, Kanter, 1994; Kanter & Fox, 2014; Peters, 2002, Smedley, 2001). Second, universities and districts often have different views of the role of teachers, which can impact the nature of their joint work (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Zeichner, 1986). Third, partnerships frequently suffer from structural and resource constraints (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009; Brady, 2008; Kanter, 2016a, Sandholtz, 1999). Finally, it takes a great deal of time and care to design an effective partnership (Hora & Millar, 2011).

Critical elements of a successful district-university partnership

Drawing from district-university partnership research and business management theory, at least eight elements must be attended to in order to establish an effective and sustainable district-university partnership. These eight elements include leadership, developing a vision, establishing shared goals, recognizing different interests, developing strategies and structures, investing time and resources, communication, and relationship engagement. Each of these eight elements will be explored below.

1. Leadership. Successful district-university partnerships require strong and
stable leadership from multiple levels of the partner organizations (Brady, 2008; Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Hora & Millar, 2011). A district-university partnership presents different leadership demands from leaders in different roles. While roles and positions are likely to vary, it is helpful to distinguish between two broad categories of leaders: organization leaders (those individuals sitting at the highest levels of each organization, such as a district superintendent and a university dean, chancellor, or president), and partnership leaders (those individuals charged with designing and leading the work of the partnership).

**Organization leaders.** Organization leaders must be responsible for ensuring that the vision and mission of the partnership are strategically aligned with the vision and mission of their organization. Once that alignment is established, these leaders are uniquely positioned and responsible for focusing resources, energy, and support towards the partnership. Since the partnership is essentially a new organization that may require different resources, processes, and priorities than traditional programs or initiatives within the partner organizations, the organization leaders must also be responsible for removing institutional barriers when certain institutional processes or policies are unnecessarily stifling the work of the partnership (Christensen & Raynor, 2013).

Furthermore, alignment must be considered externally as well. Gray (1989) warns that the larger environmental context cannot be ignored. Since organization leaders may have the best visibility into the dynamic nature of the external environment, they play a critical role in ensuring that the partnership remains relevant and focused on the right work.

**Partnership leaders.** Successful partnership leaders must see themselves as
leading an organization, not a program or an initiative. Creating a partnership between two organizations is in fact creating a new organization. As mentioned earlier, this new organization can be conceptualized as a “3rd space,” or, “an entirely new arena for activity in which competing interests, perspectives, and opinions play out as different organizations come together and working groups form and begin operating” (Hora & Millar, 2011, p. 16).

While there are challenges inherent in creating any new organization, a partnership’s challenges are unique in part due to the differences between the original partner organizations. Unlike a new organization, a partnership does not start with a blank slate. Rather, organizations entering a partnership may enter with significant differences. Individuals engaged in partnerships can struggle to navigate these differences as they attempt to work effectively together (Hora & Millar, 2011).

To face these challenges, partnership leaders must have “adaptive expertise,” which allows individuals to use their knowledge to develop unique solutions to unique challenges (Hora & Miller, 2011). While individuals may be particularly adept at navigating their home organizations, effective partnership leadership requires the skillful navigation of two organizations. Partnership leaders must understand their own system and be open and interested in crossing boundaries to learn about their partner’s system. Hora and Millar (2011) express the need for partnership leaders to be “flexible and able to cross organizational and cultural boundaries” (p. 22). To do so, effective boundary crossers anticipate and mitigate problems, listen, empathize, find common ground, and deal with conflict (Hora & Millar, 2011).

2. Developing a Vision. Partners must invest the time necessary to create a shared
agenda for their work together (Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Brady, 2008; Gray, 1989; Hora & Millar, 2011). This shared agenda must start with a shared understanding of the purpose for their partnership.

Thought leaders in the business sector can help distinguish between two fundamentally different types of partnerships: partnerships for the purpose of improvement and partnerships for the purpose of innovation. Business management researchers consider this difference when studying mergers and acquisitions (M&A) between companies. If partners are merely interested in improving what they are already doing, they will look at each other in terms of the resources they have to offer. Christensen, Alton, Rising, and Waldeck (2011) refer to this sort of acquisition as an LBM, or “leverage my business model,” where one partner utilizes the resources of the other in service of their current way of doing business (p. 50). This vision for a district-university partnership could focus on the fair and efficient exchange of resources. Using the partnership models described above, this might look like a limited or coordinated partnership.

A fundamentally different kind of partnership involves organizations using the partnership to fundamentally change the way they do business. In this case, partners are interested in joining the partnership for more than the resources of the other partner; they are also interested in learning how the other’s processes and priorities can help them reinvent themselves. Christensen et al. (2011) refer to this sort of acquisition as an RBM, or “reinvent my business model” (p. 50). For this sort of partnership, it is less about mining the other partner for its resources, and more about learning from the other partner’s way of doing business. Rather than seeing different processes, values, and
cultures as challenges to overcome, it is precisely within each partner's differences where the true value of the partnership lies. A partnership where the partners are looking to innovate and change the way they do business is more closely aligned with the collaborative district-university partnership type described above.

Districts and universities may pursue a partnership because they hope to bridge the gap between research and practice or between schools and universities (Sacs, 1997; Brady, 2009), learn more about the operation and management of each other (Brady, 2009), fundamentally change the way they recruit, develop, and support teachers and principals (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), or solve complex problems that they alone cannot solve (Hora & Millar, 2011). Partnerships that appreciate the scope and complexity of their work at the onset and adjust their approach as needed over time are more likely to be successful (Sealey, Robson, & Hutchins, 1997).

Similar to individuals engaged in an emerging romantic relationship, districts and universities will do themselves a favor by having a DTR conversation. In today’s lingo, DTR refers to “Define The Relationship” (Hodges, 2003). As today’s romantics know, the lack of a clear and common understanding of what the relationship is, and is not, can quickly lead to confusion, apprehension, failed expectations, and broken hearts. An open and honest conversation about each partner’s hopes and fears for the relationship may make the partners feel vulnerable, but it is better to know sooner rather than later whether the relationship is truly a match made in heaven or simply a fleeting infatuation.

3. Establishing Shared Goals. After the partners reach a common understanding of the nature of their relationship, it is time for them to get specific about what exactly they hope to accomplish. Most partnerships begin with the hope that each institution will
be able to utilize the unique skills and assets of the other partner in order to achieve particular goals (Hora & Millar, 2011). Hora and Millar (2011) also suggest that partnerships should work to define problems, goals, and objectives, in that order.

Developing a clear understanding of the problem to be solved is an essential step toward solving it (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Gray, 1989; Heifetz, Grashow, Linsky, 2009b; Herrmann, 2017; Hora & Millar, 2011). A common understanding of the problem can facilitate consensus building around the selection of specific goals. In order to ensure that each partner is committed to making the relationship work, it is important that the partnership goals are significant for each partner (Gray, 1989; Kanter, 2016b).

4. Recognizing Different Interests. Beyond shared goals, districts and universities will also likely have individual goals related to the partnership. While partners may not naturally feel obliged to be explicit and forthcoming with these goals, doing so can make a successful partnership more likely. As Hora & Millar (2011) argue, “…you should be cautious about proceeding with partners who are motivated by too much or too little self-interest” (p. 6).

While it is not necessary, or even desirable, for two organizations to be completely aligned, understanding where they diverge will help the partners anticipate where the partnership may face challenges. Each partner represents an organization with a unique mission, external political demands and expectations, culture, and goals, and divergent interests have the potential to compromise the effectiveness of the partnership (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009). Hora and Millar (2011) note that both institutions have entire histories that define their differences. A district may be looking to reduce the variability within its teaching staff and improve fidelity to the standard curriculum. A
university may be looking to help teachers develop as professionals with the responsibility for making decisions (Zeichner, 1986). The sustainability of a partnership ultimately relies on both partners’ interests being met. Therefore, each partner should strive to develop a deep understanding of each other’s interests (Gray, 1989; Hora & Millar, 2011; Lax & Sebenius, 2006).

There is power in the differences between partners. However, history is full of examples of partnerships that fail to realize this promise, and are instead hampered by their differences. Failure to identify and understand where the value of a partnership lies can be a significant strategic mistake (Christensen et al., 2011).

5. Developing Systems and Structures. Various researchers have asserted the importance of designing administrative structures and systems that will help the partnership achieve its goals (Brady, 2008; Gray, 1989; Kanter, 2016b; Hora & Millar, 2011). Hora and Millar (2011) recommend taking time to thoughtfully plan and design structures that make sense not only for the partnership goals, but also given the unique features of the partner organizations. Formalizing the partnership by creating systems and structures is not only operationally necessary, but also symbolically important (Brady, 2008).

The partnership must create policies and processes that support the desired goals and rethink current policies and processes that may work against partnership goals (Kanter, 2011). For example, a district policy prohibiting non-district employee visitors in classrooms might limit potential partnership work. Partnership leaders must understand which organizational policies and processes can be changed to accommodate the partnership, as well as the areas in which no flexibility is possible. Partnership leaders
who fail to consider the cultures and critical features of the partner organizations, and as a result design a partnership that is at odds with the partner organizations, are not likely to be successful (Hora & Millar, 2011). Other considerations for systems and structures include evaluation (Russell, 2010; Hora & Millar, 2011), ensuring participation from all affected and interested individuals (Brady, 2008), and ensuring effective integration across the two organizations (Kanter, 2016b).

6. Investing Time and Resources. Organizations involved in effective partnerships invest a great deal of resources (Brady, 2008; Kanter, 2016a; Kanter, 2016b). The investment of resources is both practically and symbolically important. Partners can demonstrate their long-term commitment to the partnership by devoting resources to the relationship (Kanter, 2016b). Partner organizations engaged in a district-university partnership may choose to reduce the responsibilities of teachers and faculty who are involved in the partnership, make joint appointments, and find other ways to ensure adequate time and energy is focused on the success of the partnership (Brady, 2008).

7. Communication. Successful partnerships require partners to constantly share information regarding objectives, goals, and the progress of the work (Hora & Millar, 2011; Kanter, 2016b). Failure to effectively communicate with key stakeholders and participants can cause serious challenges for the work of the partnership (Bullough & Kauchak, 1997).

Leaders must create systems for participants to report and share trouble spots so they are able to make necessary adjustments to ensure the partnership’s success (Kanter, 2011; Hora & Millar, 2011). District-university partnerships may run into communication
challenges when partners are required to deal with large schools, the turnover of faculty, and the departmentalized nature of their organizations (Bullough & Kauchak, 1997). Consequently, a partnership must develop structures and procedures that consider the unique set of challenges and obstacles and allow for meaningful interactions (Hora & Millar, 2011).

8. Relationship Engagement. Relationships matter. Particularly when two partners have disagreements, building trust, respect, and relationships is critical to the success of joint efforts (Brady, 2008; Bullough & Kauchak, 1997; Fisher & Ury, 2011; Gray, 1989; Herrmann, 2011; Hora & Millar, 2011; Smedley, 2001). Building effective working relationships can take a great deal of time, and should be considered one of the objectives of the planning phase (Hora & Millar, 2011). Partners can build trust by engaging in a variety of behaviors, including establishing predictability, participating in frequent face-to-face meetings or social gatherings, surfacing and managing power dynamics (Hora & Millar, 2011), practicing transparent and effective communication (Herrmann, 2017), involving all participants in decision making, acknowledging participant contributions (Brady, 2008), and creating opportunities for smaller and short term wins to develop a “tradition of trust” (Schelling, 1960, p. 45).

Even with careful planning and a sincere attempt at appreciation and respect, conflict is a very real possibility. However, conflict does not have to be a purely negative experience. Conflict can be necessary to get partners to think differently, and the process of solving problems together can build social cohesion (Hora & Millar, 2011). Harnessing conflict in this way is a leadership task. According to leadership experts Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009a), “The art of leadership in today’s world involves
orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos, and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive” (p. 66).

When conflict is not dealt with effectively, however, it can erode trust and undermine the collective identity of the partnership participants (Hora & Millar, 2011). Hora and Millar (2011) remind us that, “...the goal of creating a 3rd space of partnership is not to create a single way of doing things, or a ‘common culture,’ but to harness different views and areas of expertise in a productive manner” (p. 23). The differences between partners that make conflict likely are also assets of the partnership. Finding ways to leverage differences without allowing them to spoil collaborative efforts is, therefore, the work of partnerships.

Theory of Action

Universities and school districts have similar missions and pursue many of the same societal impacts. However, their cultures, structures, perspectives, and interests can be starkly different. While these differences can create challenges for partnerships, they also create substantively distinct capabilities as organizations, resulting in different abilities and areas of expertise. Based on this review of knowledge, I drafted the following theory of action for what leads to an effective partnership.

If a partnership is supported by each partner’s senior leadership with a clear and compelling vision, is led by strong partnership leadership that recognizes different interests, develops systems and structures aligned to the partnership vision and goals, has adequate access to resources and time, and focuses on effective systems for communication and building relationships, then the partnership will be effective and
sustainable.

In the next section I will present a personal leadership theory of action that was inspired by this Review of Knowledge for Action but embedded in the context of my strategic project.
Description of the Strategic Project

*Forward Madison*, a partnership between MMSD and the UW-M SOE, is a strategy to grow, induct, and support educators in MMSD schools. The partnership reflects a human capital strategy to impact student achievement with a focus on educational equity.

My strategic project focused on the future of Forward Madison. Specifically, I focused on the question: What actions must be taken in order for Forward Madison to serve as a model for an *effective* and *sustainable* district-university partnership?

I chose to organize my strategic project work into three phases:

- **Phase 1: Diagnostic** - First, I combined the knowledge captured in my RKA with my on-the-ground learning during the opening weeks of my residency to develop a conceptual model to help me understand, diagnose, and analyze the Forward Madison partnership.

- **Phase 2: Developing Recommendations** - Next, I created a process to develop a set of thoughtful and actionable recommendations that had support from key stakeholders.

- **Phase 3: Leading Change** - Finally, I shifted my leadership strategy in an attempt to better meet the demands of the context.

**Phase 1: Diagnostic**

My first on-the-ground leadership move was diagnostic in nature. While I was armed with the extensive knowledge captured in my RKA, I heeded expert leadership advice to “Resist the Leap to Action” (Heifetz, Grashow, Linsky, 2009b, p. 44) and engaged myself in an extensive diagnostic phase.
My diagnostic phase, which occurred mostly in July and the beginning of August, consisted of conducting dozens of interviews, observing meetings, reviewing documents, and learning acronyms. During this phase I experienced two significant changes in the way I thought about partnerships, which ultimately led me to create a new district-university partnership model.

The first change in my understanding was in response to the need to capture more interdependency in my conception of district-university partnerships. Instead of a laundry list of critical elements, I began to see a partnership as a complex set of interactions. The eight elements from my RKA could not be analyzed independently because of the interdependencies they had with one another. For example, I could not begin to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership’s systems and structures until I understood the goals it was trying to achieve and the overall vision that was guiding the way. I realized that I had to see not only the critical elements, but also the relationships among them.

The second change to my understanding concerns the relationships among the partnership, each of the partner organizations, and the community. While the partnership is in fact its own new and unique entity, it also exists within each partner organization. Even if a partnership designed ideal systems to help it achieve its goals, it could still run into challenges if those systems did not align with the systems of the partner organizations. For example, a partnership could have its own unique budget cycle, tied to the funds it receives, which is different than the budget cycle of the district and different

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3 MMSD provided me with an onboarding binder that included a document that defined over 230 acronyms.
than the budget cycle of the university. My diagnostic phase helped me recognize that the partnership exists as its own entity and also as an entity within the district and within the university.

I synthesized the knowledge from my RKA, these new insights gained from my diagnostic phase, Christensen’s and Johnson's (2009) research on business models, Kanter’s (2016a; 2016b) research on strategic alliances, and Mark Moore’s (2003) research on public value to create my own conceptual model for district-university partnerships (see Appendix A). My updated list of critical elements now included leadership, shared goals, organizational model (value proposition, resources, processes, and funding formula), communication, and relationships.

My diagnostic phase proved valuable, as improving my understanding of district-university partnerships led me to tailor my generic district-university partnership Theory of Action (see page 24) to the specific Forward Madison context:

If

- A) Forward Madison is supported by each partner’s senior leadership with a clear and compelling vision, and
- B) is led by strong partnership leadership that i) establishes goals, designs and develops an ii) organizational model, iii) communication norms and systems, and iv) builds productive relationships, all aligned and in service of the goals,

while

- C) considering the challenges and opportunities afforded by the multiple arenas in which the partnership exists,

then

- D) Forward Madison will be effective and sustainable.

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4 I use the term “organizational model” to refer to an organization’s value proposition, resources, processes, and funding model, which is inspired by the business model proposed by Christensen and Johnson (2009).
Empowered with an enriched theory of action for an effective and sustainable partnership, I conducted a SWOT analysis\(^5\) of the Forward Madison partnership in mid-August. The SWOT analysis was completed for each of the five elements of my conceptual model: leadership, goals, organizational model, communication, and relationships. The SWOT analysis was informed by 154 pieces of evidence from personal communication from 21 stakeholders including members of the Forward Madison leadership team, observations from Forward Madison meetings, a review of Forward Madison internal documents such as meeting agendas and minutes, progress updates, mid-year and year-end reports, and external documents such as presentations and the Forward Madison website.

**Phase 2: Developing Recommendations**

Next, I developed a personal leadership theory of action and a process to create a set of actionable recommendations for Forward Madison. Based on the nature of my project, my personal leadership theory of action was largely inspired by the creative problem solving processes, strategies, and mindsets offered by negotiation theory and practice. Having recently taken a course on negotiation theory and practice at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, I was inspired by the power of carefully designed processes to create value while meeting the interests of different parties. I felt that such an approach was particularly relevant in the context of a district-university partnership, a

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\(^5\) A SWOT analysis is a structured analysis method that is used to explore the strengths and weaknesses of a given project or organization, as well as the potential opportunities and threats it faces. Christensen, Andrews, Bower, Hamermesh, and Porter (1987) refer to identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks as part of a process for a company to develop an economic strategy.
context wherein partners often try to create value while managing different interests, processes, and constraints.

Personal Leadership Theory of Action

*If I*

A) demonstrate a strong commitment to learning and develop expertise,
B) intentionally build relationships (meet with people individually, express appreciation, and focus on affiliation and other core concerns),
C) keep conversations focused on interests rather than positions,

*then I will be able to*

D) leverage those relationships for candid and helpful feedback and advice and
E) quickly learn relevant and critical knowledge and context,

*which will lead to*

F) a strong set of recommendations with significant leadership commitment, a strong likelihood of adoption, and a greater personal capacity to lead implementation.

Informed by my personal leadership theory of action, I created a specific process to develop a set of recommendations. I drew upon concepts described by negotiation experts William Ury and Roger Fisher (1983) in their book *Getting to Yes*. This included, notably, the “single text approach.” This approach can begin with a mediator drafting a proposal that attempts to meet the interests of multiple parties. The mediator then takes

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6 Core Concerns are five human wants that can play a pivotal role in negotiation, as described by Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (2005) in the book *Beyond Reason*. The five core concerns are: appreciation, affiliation, role, status, and autonomy.
the draft to each party and invites them to share their criticisms and recommendations for improvement. The mediator makes revisions to the document based on the feedback provided, and the process continues until all sides can agree on the draft. I found this process to be especially compelling in that mediators can use this approach to create an agreement between two parties with multiple interests. Additionally, my process was inspired by the negotiation practice of focusing on the underlying interests of parties rather than specific positions, since there is a greater likelihood for creative and value-creating solutions when parties focus on interests (Ury & Fisher, 1983).

Process for Developing Recommendations:

- Develop a draft set of recommendations based on the SWOT analysis and informed by my RKA and theory on organizational capabilities and culture\(^7\)
- Utilize a single text approach for gathering feedback on the draft set of recommendations
- Hold individual meetings with key stakeholders that are strategically sequenced\(^8\)
- Focus meetings on interests rather than positions. Ask:
  - What are you most excited about and why?
  - What are you most concerned about?
    - What/whose interests are missing?
    - What additional or different ideas do you have?
- Continue to revise, update, and follow up with individuals as needed
- Finalize set of recommendations and present to key stakeholders

\(^7\) I considered culture as defined by Christensen (2006) and Schein (2010) as the learned group responses to problems it faces, and organizational capabilities as defined by Christensen and Kaufman (2008) as what an organization is able to achieve based on its set of resources, processes, and priorities.

\(^8\) Sequencing is a concept in negotiation theory that brings intention to the process of whom you approach and in what order (Lax & Sebenius, 1991).
In alignment with my planned process, I created a draft set of recommendations informed by my SWOT analysis and the research from my RKA, organizational culture, and organizational capabilities. The draft set of recommendations included a brief explanation of my conceptual model, a summary of the SWOT analysis, and 33 recommendations that fell under four main strategies: 1) Create new value -- find and pursue new opportunities, 2) Clarify and communicate vision, goals, and progress -- articulate a clear theory of action that drives strategy, 3) (Re)Define goals -- the right people doing the right work, and 4) Institutionalize -- house partnership work where it will survive and thrive.

Between mid-August and mid-October, I met with 12 Forward Madison stakeholders to receive feedback on my draft recommendations document. All of the meetings were conducted individually except for one, which occurred as a pair. I used the same protocol for each meeting (see Appendix B) and documented each stakeholder’s feedback. I logged the feedback from all of the stakeholders in one document so I could track themes to inform changes to the recommendations document and gather evidence for my personal leadership theory of action.

I used the feedback from these individual meetings to make adjustments to the recommendations. Eventually, after meeting with all key stakeholders, I shared an updated version of the document with the Forward Madison leadership team for review and consideration on October 21st. From start to finish, my process to develop the recommendations took approximately two and a half months.
Phase 3: Leading Change

While comments and feedback during my individual meetings suggested that there was ample agreement on the content of the SWOT analysis and the recommendations among the Forward Madison leadership team, the work was certainly not done. Little progress was made on adopting many of the recommendations, even several weeks after I presented and shared the recommendations document with the Forward Madison leadership team.

With pressure from organization leaders for progress on key aspects of the partnership, yet stalled progress on my recommendations, an important distinction became clear to me. Leading change would require a different set of leadership moves than I used during the first two phases.

Consequently, my leadership strategy shifted to play a more active role in helping the team with some of the more urgent recommendations. One of these urgent recommendations focused on gaining clarity on the different roles and responsibilities among organization leaders, partnership leaders, and partnership managers. Another recommendation focused on clarifying aspects of some of the partnership programs. A third recommendation involved creating a process to share partnership information more frequently with organization leaders so that they could share partnership successes with other stakeholders and help problem solve around challenges.

My new leadership strategy relied on identifying opportunities to focus attention and energy towards making progress on these goals. In contrast to my initial strategy, which basically amounted to telling the team, “Here are the things you need to figure out,” I was now actively looking for opportune moments to leverage and push the
conversation in helpful and productive ways.

Some of these opportunities came in the form of district processes. First, the partnership was interested in pursuing foundation dollars to support a future Forward Madison leadership role. The possibility of this new leadership role was particularly exciting given the central role of leadership in my district-university partnership theory of action. I was charged with the responsibility of drafting the proposal, where I was able to incorporate many of my insights and recommendations around partnership leadership.

The second opportunity came from an MMSD system-wide effort to develop a coherent fundraising strategy. As one of the district’s fundraising priorities, Forward Madison was required to complete a fundraising plan using a standard template designed by the MMSD Office of Strategic Partnerships and Innovation. The MMSD fundraising plan required each fundraising priority to articulate key activities, outcomes, and a five-year budget.

I communicated the rationale of the fundraising plan to the Forward Madison leadership team and outlined the key areas around which the team would need to make some decisions. While my initial set of recommendations had pushed for clarity on similar information, my hope was that the fundraising plan would help focus the conversation.

The key shift in phase three of my strategic project was a shift in strategy around leading change. Whereas my initial leadership strategy was to develop a compelling set of recommendations, my strategy did not consider how those recommendations would be implemented. The strategy assumed that good recommendations would necessarily be adopted if a team were merely presented with them. In this third phase, my leadership
strategy relied on finding opportunities within the context for my recommendations to take hold.
Evidence and Analysis

The evidence below is categorized by the six parts of my personal leadership theory of action. The evidence is also categorized as “outputs,” which mostly refer to the “if” part of my theory of action, or “outcomes,” which mostly refer to the “then” part of my theory of action (see page 30).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Leadership Theory of Action</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
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| A) Demonstrate a strong commitment to learning and developing expertise | **Outputs:**  
  ● 21 personal communications with key stakeholders  
  ● 154 pieces of data to inform my SWOT analysis |
| B) Intentionally build relationships (meet with people individually, express appreciation, and focus on affiliation and other core concerns) | **Outputs:**  
  ● Meetings with 21 stakeholders that helped inform SWOT analysis  
  ● 10 individual meetings with key stakeholders to receive feedback on draft set of recommendations |
| C) Keep conversations focused on interests rather than positions | **Outputs:**  
  ● Feedback protocol that asked participants to consider their and others’ interests (see Appendix B) |
| D) Leverage those relationships for candid and helpful feedback and advice  
  E) Quickly learn relevant and critical knowledge and context | **Outcomes:**  
  ● 9 individuals shared relevant history, political context, or offered me personal advice regarding my strategic project and recommendations  
  ● Feedback meetings with stakeholders resulted in 34 changes to my draft set of recommendations |
| F) A strong set of recommendations with significant leadership commitment, an | **Outputs:**  
  ● A district-university conceptual }
increased likelihood of adoption, and a greater personal capacity to lead implementation.

model (see Appendix A)

- A SWOT analysis informed by 154 pieces of data
- A set of 33 recommendations

Outcomes:

- All 11 Forward Madison stakeholders resonated with at least some of the SWOT analysis and recommendations
- Several weeks after presenting the updated recommendations document, little progress had been made on many of the recommendations

Big Picture Analysis

I believed that my original personal leadership theory of action and process would lead me to develop a set of thoughtful and necessary recommendations that had strong commitment from key stakeholders and a high likelihood of adoption. I now appreciate the fact that there was a significant leap in logic between the existence of a thoughtful and necessary set of recommendations and those recommendations being adopted. Perhaps this theory of action suffered from the “and then a miracle happens” reasoning, where no clear logic connects the mere existence of ideas to the result of those ideas being implemented.

My initial theory of action positioned me in a role similar to a mediator in a negotiation. Indeed, much of the process I designed was inspired by negotiation theory, in that I used a single text approach, searched for interests, met with parties individually, and strived towards creating a document with which everyone could resonate. In this
approach, my role was on the periphery of the action. During my first Ed.L.D. return campus visit in September, we were encouraged to consider who was the “user” of our strategic project. Ultimately, I determined that the Forward Madison leadership team was the user of my project, which I defined at the time as a set of recommendations. My initial theory of action was built on these premises; my role was to develop a process that resulted in useful information for other people to use.

While the evidence suggests that my theory of action inspired a process that was effective in producing recommendations that resonated with many members of the team, the theory of action suffered from a critical assumption: the information would be enough to actually realize the opportunities and bring about the changes called for in the recommendations. While this theory of action might have been proven true in a different context, I would argue that the unique context of district-university partnerships requires a different type of leadership intervention.

The complex context of Forward Madison was predictable by my RKA. The district and the university have different cultures, different organizational designs, different decision making processes, different norms for working pace, and different lines of authority. Perhaps in a simpler or more coherent context, my initial theory of action and process would have been sufficient to facilitate change. However, the district-university context required me to take on a different role with a different strategy. Instead of a serving as a mediator who facilitated a process to develop and share information, I had to become a more intentional actor within the context and use the type of leadership levers that are available to those with limited formal authority.

I will analyze three main ideas in this section. First, I will analyze the strengths
and weaknesses of my process to develop a set of recommendations. Second, I will analyze the limitations of my initial theory of action, making the distinction between leadership moves to diagnose and leadership moves to act, both of which, I believe, are important and necessary for successful leadership. Third, I will analyze the effectiveness of my shift in strategy.

**Developing Recommendations**

The fact that I was new to the environment afforded me the ability to ask a lot of questions. My colleagues demonstrated a tremendous amount of patience and grace with my lack of knowledge and were very supportive. I was able to ask questions that likely had not been asked in a very long time, questions that may have been difficult to ask or would have been perceived as loaded questions if asked by someone else. The fact that I was new to the context also meant that I was learning everything about the partnership and about each organization for the first time. Thanks to the encouragement and authorization of my mentor, the district Superintendent, I was given the luxury of time to explore the entire organization. I frequently invited myself to meetings and got wide exposure quickly. This luxury proved valuable as I was able to learn the context relatively quickly and make meaningful connections across different departments of work.

Individual meetings helped me form relationships, build trust, and communicate my interests and intentions. Through individual meetings, I was able to articulate my double-track agenda as a resident: “I’m here to learn *and* I’m here to help.” I was able to communicate my intentions regarding supporting the partnership and express my
humility and excitement for being placed in Madison. I was cognizant that as an outsider from Harvard, less experienced than everyone with whom I was working, I could easily be perceived as someone who naively thought he could swoop in for a few months to help the organization solve its problems. Thus, I knew that if I did not communicate my intentions, goals, and appreciation for the residency opportunity, then other people could paint their own picture of me. Individual meetings provided a powerful opening to intentionally communicate my narrative.

Individual meetings also provided opportunities for people to share historical context, political information, and other advice that was significant to my task of creating a set of recommendations for the partnership. One indication of the strength of the relationships I was forming was the extent others were willing to be open and candid regarding information necessary for my success. Several individuals across multiple conversations shared valuable insight into historical successes or challenges, helping me avoid suggesting something that had already been tried or helping me improve on something that might have promise. Individuals also gave me “heads up” and alerted me to “red flags” regarding ideas that may have political ramifications. This information helped me frame ideas with an appreciation for the political environment.

Finally, several individuals offered me personal advice, ranging from to whom I should speak, how I should frame an idea, language I should use, and even offers to help me personally or professionally. The act of sharing these ideas, concerns, or advice proved valuable in strengthening our relationships and trust. It is also important to note that this is not the type of information that would likely be shared within a larger group discussion, so the individual meetings appeared to be an enabling condition to make this
possible.

The single text approach allowed me to synthesize ideas from multiple stakeholders and sources and document them in one place. Throughout my meeting observations, review of documents, and individual conversations, new opportunities and ideas for improvement were frequently shared. Using this approach made it possible for me to begin to develop a coherent picture for how everything fit together, in contrast to a state wherein ideas might surface, be forgotten about, and then resurface later.

Strategically sequencing the single text approach allowed me to test ideas with organization leaders before receiving feedback elsewhere. I started my individual meetings to receive feedback once I completed the first draft of recommendations. My first individual district meeting was with the Superintendent and my first individual university meeting was with the Dean. While feedback from all stakeholders was critical to my theory of action, positioning the Superintendent and the Dean in the first spot of the sequence for each organization ensured that I did not float any ideas or recommendations that were not likely to be moved forward. These meetings also provided data regarding organizational interests and values as they related to the recommendations. I received strong signals regarding where I should push, which helped inform my approach to subsequent meetings.

Offering potential recommendations to stakeholders was an effective and efficient way to learn about history, interests, and politics. The process also provided evidence regarding the “ripeness” of different issues, which refers to people’s readiness to take up a particular issue (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 126). Nine individuals shared relevant history, insights into organizational interests, and political considerations in direct response to my
specific recommendations. While this information was vital to an effective set of recommendations, as well as to my personal success as someone leading this process, much of it had not been surfaced in previous conversations. Thus, it seems as though offering specific recommendations served as an effective tool for uncovering valuable information with respect to history, interests, and politics. Similarly, Heifetz et al. (2009b) refers to the concept of “Audition Your Ideas,” where you present to others a possible interpretation and learn from how they respond (p. 122).

While time intensive, this carefully designed process produced a comprehensive set of recommendations that resonated with most key stakeholders. Two months elapsed between the first individual feedback meeting and sharing the updated document with the entire team. Scheduling individual meetings with key stakeholders took a significant amount of time, particularly given the desire to sequence them strategically. However, the process produced incredibly valuable feedback and insight. I made 34 changes to the original document, which helped ensure its alignment to each partner’s vision and interests. These changes also allowed individual members to see how their specific feedback helped shape the final document. Every stakeholder was able to resonate with at least some of the recommendations, and several commented on how accurately the analysis captured the strengths and needs of the partnership.

**Limited Theory of Action**

The leadership moves that led to the development of my set of recommendations were not sufficiently strong to make change. In spite of the resonance many felt towards
the analysis and the recommendations, the document failed to provide a clear pathway forward.

My RKA suggests that a district-university partnership is a complex context for exercising leadership. Even if people generally agree with recommendations, district-university partnership work is difficult, so making progress on anything places unusually challenging demands on its leaders. To name a few, differences in culture, pace, organizational coherence, and organizational processes create challenges to partnership work.

**Culture.** Differences in organizational culture define different criteria for decision making between two organizations. A university, a place of academia and rigorous research, rightfully places a premium on a high bar of evidence to support a given approach or decision. A district, while certainly also valuing research-informed decision-making, must sometimes make decisions before seeing an entirely clear picture. This difference in approach towards decision-making came up several times for the partnership, where some university partners expressed an interest in learning more before making a decision, while some district partners felt pressure to make decisions within shorter timeframes.

**Pace.** The pace of work at both organizations also presented challenges. Districts frequently move at a quicker pace than their university partners, which can create challenges to their joint work. This surfaced several times for the partnership as well. While district partners were often driving towards decision points and action steps, university partners were expanding the conversation and making broader connections.

**Organizational Coherence.** Districts and universities organize themselves in
different ways, which can have implications for how they work together as partners. The district prides itself on its level of coherence and the extent to which it is organized and focused around a set of specific goals and a strategic framework. On the other hand, the university prides itself on autonomy and the scholarship of individual researchers and their unique and varied contributions to the field. While each of these organizational realities has its strengths and limitations, the differences between the two can provide challenges to collaborative work. For example, the district’s specific goals and strategies limit opportunities for potential partnership work. Like all strategies do, the district’s strategies compel district leaders to determine what is, and what is not, in the scope of their work. The extent to which the expertise and capabilities of the faculty and the university align with the district's goals and strategies can have a narrowing effect on the universe of possible areas for collaboration.

Organizational processes. Finally, organizational processes between districts and universities can create additional challenges to partnership work. For example, each organization can have different budget processes. In this situation, not only were the district and the university on different budget cycles, but their processes and revenue sources themselves were fundamentally different as well. Making budget prioritization decisions was further complicated by the fact that information regarding available funds would be known at different times for each organization.

Shift in Strategy

After completing my initial recommendation development process and testing my theory of action, I realized that truly helping the partnership would require a different
kind of work. This shift required a change in the role I would play, my goals as a leader, and the strategy I would employ.

**Mediator vs. Actor.** The Superintendent and I agreed that I would shift my role and play a more active part in the work. Rather than viewing myself as a mediator to develop information to be used by others, I was charged with directly taking on some of the work.

This shift could be categorized by the difference between the role and strategy of a mediator as described in negotiation theory, and the role and strategy of someone attempting to exercise leadership as described by leadership experts Heifetz et al. (2009b). I initially felt some anxiety with the strategic shift, not knowing how others might respond to the change. As a result, I made sure to take the time to carefully plan.

**Outcomes vs. Processes.** Another shift in my strategy dealt with my leadership objective: How was I measuring my success? Initially, my objective was to create a product (a set of recommendations) that would be compelling to, and adopted by, the partnership team. However, I realized that most of the recommendations were addressing opportunities or problems that were tied up within partnership processes.

I knew that specific recommendations would be of limited utility without addressing the accompanying processes that the partnership required for long term success. Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015), experts on applying improvement sciences to education organizations, make the distinction between measurement for accountability and measurement for improvement. For measurement for accountability, “end of the line outcomes” are measured (p. 102). Initially, I was measuring my success in this way. I was most curious about the end product of my recommendations, and
whether or not they were adopted. On the other hand, measurement for improvement looks at “work processes that are the object of change” (p. 102). Hora and Millar (2011) argue that a focus on content over structures and processes is common for partnerships, in spite of the fact that cross-organizational processes and structures are needed to enable partnership work (p. 105). Thinking about my objective in this light, I started to focus more on the partnership’s ways of working.

New Approach. Leadership experts Heifetz et al. (2009b) outline seven steps to designing an effective leadership intervention. These steps provide a useful frame to understand the challenges and successes of my approach. In order, these steps are, “Get on the balcony,” “Determine the ripeness of the issue in the system,” “Ask, who am I in this picture?,” “Think hard about your framing,” “Hold steady,” “Analyze the factions that begin to emerge,” and “Keep the work at the center of people’s attention” (pp. 126-130). I will analyze my experience during the third phase of my strategic project with respect to each of these steps.

Get on the balcony. “Get on the balcony” refers to the leadership practice of taking a step back in order to diagnose what is happening (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 126). This is precisely what I did, with the support of the Superintendent, after realizing that my original theory of action was insufficiently strong to support the partnership. Differences in culture, coherence, pace, and processes, as described above, make partnership work particularly challenging and require a different type of support.

Determine the ripeness of the issue in the system. Ripeness refers to the readiness of people to take up an issue (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 126). One of my original recommendations centered on clarifying certain aspects of the partnership programming.
Determining ripeness for making progress on clarifying these elements was difficult, in part due to the differences in ways of working between the two organizations as described above. For example, was the lack of progress due to a lack of ripeness or an interest in expanding (rather than narrowing) the conversation?

I determined that I needed to identify a strategic lever within the context to help facilitate the conversation. That lever would eventually come in the form of a district fundraising priority planning process.

*Ask: Who am I in this picture?* The “Who am I in this picture?” question requires an individual to consider who they are, how they are experienced by others, and what expectations others have on them (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 128). Because I was shifting my role and strategy, the answers to these questions were particularly important. Rather than someone facilitating a process to gather, synthesize, and share ideas, I was now going to play a more active role in the work. Initially I saw the leadership team as the user of the information I gathered and developed. Now, I myself would become the user of my own information to help me engage directly.

Redefining my role also required me to consider my formal and informal authority. While I had formal authority to provide insight and information to other people who were the users of my recommendations, my formal authority did not heretofore extend to “doing the work.” This required me to consider the informal authority I had through trust, relationships, and developing expertise, as well as the formal authority I could obtain through direct charges and mandates from my primary user, the Superintendent.

*Think hard about your framing.* Framing refers to how your intervention can be
communicated to the team so that they understand your intentions, the importance of the work, and how they can help (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 128). As described in the Project Description section of this capstone, I decided to frame one of my interventions in the context of a district process to develop a fundraising plan. The fundraising plan template required each district fundraising priority (of which this partnership was one) to articulate aspects of the partnership programming. Consequently, this fundraising plan appeared to be an excellent opportunity to frame the importance of the work and why it had to be done now. Being charged with the responsibility to develop the fundraising plan also granted me the formal authority to play a more direct role in the work.

My first attempt at framing the work offered a slight nod to the fundraising plan but did not provide a compelling rationale for why the work was important and why it was urgent. Not surprisingly, my first attempt to gain traction on this conversation was not entirely fruitful. However, it seemed like the fundraising plan was a good opportunity for the partnership team to coalesce around a specific process to engage in a focused conversation. Additionally, and not insignificantly, I was personally feeling pressure from my organization, the district, to make progress on this plan. This compelled me to engage in a second attempt at framing the fundraising plan as important and urgent work that would help us make progress. In this second attempt, I provided far more context for the district's rationale for creating a coherent fundraising strategy, the importance of clarifying different aspects of our partnership work for inclusion into the fundraising plan, and a clear description for how the team could help.

In another example of framing the work, I offered to take the lead on implementing one of my original recommendations to develop a process to increase
communication regarding partnership successes and challenges to each partner’s organization leaders, the Dean and the Superintendent. This recommendation took the form of a process to solicit and compile “red flags” and “success snippets” from all members of the partnership leadership team on a regular basis. The purpose of the process was to help ensure organization leaders were aware of recent partnership challenges (red flags) and successes (success snippets) so that they could be empowered to help problem solve as well as share successes with other stakeholders. As I noted in the RKA, systems to communicate trouble spots to leaders are critical elements of a successful partnership. Once the first compiled list of red flags and success snippets was sent to the organization leaders, both organization leaders replied with enthusiasm and appreciation for the information. This response helped legitimize the process, establish a norm and expectation for participation, and keep the process focused on the content.

This is a strong example of how I focused on a “work process” as the object for change, in alignment with “measurement for improvement” as described by Bryk et al. (2015). The mere process of soliciting, compiling, and sharing red flags and success snippets had some positive impacts for the partnership leadership team. For example, one member of the leadership team submitted a red flag of which another member was not yet aware. Upon seeing this item as a red flag, the specific problem was quickly resolved. While the idea to solicit, compile, and share this sort of information is rather simple, it is quite possible for a team to miss problems and opportunities unless there is a formal process for surfacing and sharing them.

**Hold Steady.** Holding steady is the practice of providing sufficient wait time and silence after completing an intervention. At this point, the intervention should have a life
of its own and no longer be yours (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 129). This practice was difficult for me as I found myself eager to jump in and defend, explain, or advocate for my ideas. However, I found the practice helpful as I myself tried to avoid becoming the focal point of the intervention. Rather, I wanted the attention to be kept on the idea or process itself. Heifetz (1994) argues that this can be done by providing “a context for action” (p. 225). In my case, this context for action came in the form of the processes I was building.

Establishing clear processes for my interventions made it easier for me to hold steady. For example, in the case of the fundraising plan, the fact that sections of the plan were already established made it easier to contain the conversation without needing to step in as a facilitator.

**Analyze the factions that begin to emerge.** Analyzing factions requires an individual to monitor who is engaged, who is resisting, and the factions that these individuals may represent. This information will be critical to how you refine your change strategy (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 130). Establishing interventions that had clear processes made analyzing factions easier.

The process of articulating specific ideas in the fundraising document, or reacting to someone else’s ideas, provided more precise data of where people stood on specific issues. This information was helpful because the team could learn where there was strong agreement across different members of the leadership team and where future discussion and problem solving would be required. Without a clear process that made these positions clear and explicit, it would have been difficult to engage in a focused conversation about the work that needed to be done and the discussions that needed to be had.
Keep the work at the center of people’s attention. Avoiding work is a common response when faced with adaptive challenges, because engaging may require people to experience incompetence, disloyalty, or an even more direct loss (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 130). It is important to see when this is happening and redirect people’s attention back towards the work at hand (Heifetz et al., 2009b, p. 131). Keeping the work at the center of people’s attention was made dramatically easier by anchoring the work in specific processes. I came to realize, from my residency experience at large, that structures and processes can have a profound effect on interactions, routines, and other general ways of working. Over time, these new behaviors and practices can eventually lead to new cultural models (Hora & Millar, 2011). These changes in culture can be for better or for worse, so thoughtful attention must be given to the design and impact of new processes and structures.

Another significant factor that appeared to accelerate progress was getting the right people at the table. When additional members of the district staff were brought in based on the alignment to, and knowledge about, the partnership activities and goals, the partnership made significant progress on developing new opportunities and connections. This provided some evidence for the importance of one of my strategic recommendations: “Institutionalize - House Partnership Work Where it Will Survive and Thrive.”

The fundraising plan proved to be a powerful tool to focus conversation on key elements of some of the partnership work. However, I realized that if the goal of my leadership intervention was simply to help produce a fundraising plan, then my efforts would have limited lasting benefit to the partnership. Alternatively, if my efforts focused
on work processes as the focus of change, then I would be oriented towards “measurement for improvement” (Bryk et al., 2015). Therefore, I ultimately decided to push to establish a standard template that would engage the partnership leadership in an ongoing process of defining, discussing, and adjusting the core elements of each of the partnership’s programs: goals, key activities, outcomes, communication plan, risk assessment, progress report, and funding model. Instead of stopping at the development of one fundraising plan, I considered how I could create a process that would regularly engage the leadership team in the work processes that made the fundraising plan an effective process.

Attempting to help design and establish these processes will be the next phase of my work. While this capstone attempts to document the progress on my strategic project through the end of 2016, the work continues on.
Implications for Self

I took seriously the advice to “make myself the hero” of my capstone. The advice is not meant to encourage the telling of an infallible super-human character, but rather to make the self the protagonist of the story. In the capstone, I am what I am studying. Accordingly, the Implications for Self section is a beautiful opportunity to make the learning of that study explicit. I uncovered three significant implications for self throughout my work on my strategic project. The first implication has to do with my evolving conception of the roles of leader, researcher, and leader-researcher. The second implication deals with the opportunities and challenges of leading without formal authority. Finally, the third implication focuses on my reinvigorated commitment and faith in the idea of collaboration.

Leader-Researcher

The context of my strategic project forced me to think about the nature and origin of expertise. Since my strategic project focused on a partnership that bridges an institution of higher education with a school district, the consideration of the research-practice divide was simply inescapable. Questions such as the following were constantly swirling in my head: What is the origin of expertise? How do you make expertise actionable? When do we know enough to act?

Ideally, leaders would be able to immerse themselves in the literature, review best practices, and conduct comprehensive diagnostic work before acting. In reality, leaders must often make decisions with partial information and under limited time constraints.
Ideally, researchers would uncover truths that could be generalized to broad situations, making their findings highly consumable and actionable for practitioners. In reality, the constraints of research design often force researchers into exploring narrow research questions, and findings are heavily tied to the unique circumstances of the study. Extrapolating to the worst extremes, leaders can be susceptible to making uninformed decisions and researchers uncover findings that may have little use to the field.

However, the unique role of Ed.L.D. Resident offered me the opportunity to experience the role of leader-researcher. I was able to engage in an extended diagnostic phase, a luxury that not all leaders have. This phase gave me the discipline and time to take a researcher’s approach to the very same context in which I was also expected to exercise leadership. I benefited from a rich understanding of the context prior to performing any leadership intervention.

My diagnostic phase also helped me reconsider prior notions of how to build legitimacy. Previously, I assumed that I could build legitimacy quickly in a new context by offering new ideas and solutions to stubborn problems. This notion was particularly tempting given the amount of research I had done on district-university partnerships prior to arriving in Madison. However, due to my commitment to a disciplined diagnostic phase, I resisted the temptation to offer solutions right away. I soon realized that my ability to offer solutions was greatly limited by my ignorance on the historical context and local history of attempts to solve problems. Had I succumbed to the temptation to build legitimacy by immediately offering my “expertise,” I would have risked being seen as someone who naively thought he could solve problems without first deeply learning about them.
However, waiting to offer solutions does not mean waiting to build legitimacy. I found that a great deal of respect and admiration is afforded to people who can analyze and articulate the problem, even when they stop short of offering a solution. My research on district-university partnerships, and my course work more broadly, armed me with dozens of conceptual frameworks and models that are designed to help people think about and analyze problems. When used effectively, frameworks can empower the user to make the implicit explicit by giving a name to something people are experiencing. I found that simply providing an analysis of a situation, not a solution, was a powerful way to build legitimacy. Particularly helpful was the breadth of sources from which I drew. While in the depths of an education organization, people do not always consider how theories and frameworks from other disciplines might be helpful. I frequently drew upon ideas not only from education, but also from business and negotiation. As I consider future work, I want to be intentional about balancing my role as a researcher and a leader.

In future roles, my ability to engage in an extended learning and diagnostic phase will likely be limited compared to my experience as a resident. However, there are still ways to engage in rich diagnostic work even under such constraints. For example, I can negotiate an early start to a new role, create a structured entry process, and explicitly communicate to colleagues my entry learning objectives. Furthermore, sharing my analysis from my entry in both formal and informal ways can allow me to test my ideas as well as build legitimacy, as I spoke to above.

As a leader, I also plan to design systems to ensure that I have deep and broad visibility into the organization. The Superintendent modeled this practice for me masterfully. This can be done by creating various advisory groups, creating feedback
loops, and expressing a genuine interest in knowing what is really happening.

**Leadership without Authority**

The shift in my leadership approach during my strategic project underscores the second implication for self: the opportunities and challenges inherent in leading without formal authority. When someone leads with formal authority, her role and the user of her work is better defined. By definition, a leader with formal authority has been authorized by someone to do something. When someone leads without authority, the role she plays can be less clear, as well as the constituents (e.g. the group being served) of her leadership less defined. For example, a leader without formal authority might choose to assume the role of advocate, coach, provocateur, negotiator, spoiler, or champion in service of the constituent group of her choosing. In many ways, this is an advantage of exercising leadership without formal authority: the ability to define the role to play and the people to serve.

It is a leadership fallacy to assume that formal authority is always required to exercise leadership and accomplish critical tasks. However, leading without authority poses an array of challenges that require thoughtful consideration of role, constituent, and goal. These elements are unlikely to be as specifically defined as they frequently are for leaders with formal authority. As leadership challenges grow more ambitious and complex, even leaders with significant formal authority may find a gap between their authorization and the demands of the work they seek to accomplish. In other words, all leaders, regardless of formal authority, can benefit from improving their ability to navigate the challenges of leading without formal authority. Looking into the future, this
will require me to carefully consider the gap between my formal authorization and the leadership task, as well as who I am trying to serve, my leadership goals, and the role I should play.

I must also be mindful of the particular vulnerability to attack that comes along with leadership without authority. Ronald Heifetz (1994) warns, “If a person lacks authority, people take issue not only with the substance of his point of view but with his right to raise it” (p. 225). Providing a context for action, as I described in my analysis section, can help direct attention towards pressing issues and away from me.

Collaboration

As a classroom teacher, I valued giving my students opportunities to work together to solve complex problems. While I have long appreciated the power of collaboration, my experience with this strategic project reaffirms my belief that it is absolutely necessary. There exist plenty of problems with known solutions, many of which organizations can address on their own, or with the support of coordination between partners. However, I believe the most important problems facing our society are complex and interdependent. I also believe that our only hope in solving them is through collaboration. Problems filled with complexities, interdependencies, and stickiness require the diversity of perspectives, ideas, and resources that only a diverse set of individuals and organizations can offer. These problems demand more than limited or coordinated partnerships; they require true collaborations.

The incredibly important work of Forward Madison illustrates this point. Forward Madison is attempting to do what neither the district nor the university can do entirely on
their own. My experience working on this partnership has helped me appreciate the opportunities and challenges of working across organizational boundaries and has affirmed my commitment to the role of collaboration in my future endeavors.

Ensuring collaboration is central to my future work will require me to continuously strive for a deeper understanding of the problem my organization and I are trying to solve. A deep understanding of the problem, coupled with a realistic assessment of my personal capabilities and those of my organization, will help me determine the instances when collaboration will be necessary. As Hora and Millar (2011) write, “Collaborative partnerships work best in situations in which the participants recognize and honor the limits of their expertise and the value of others” (p. 103). While I have mainly focused on inter-organizational collaboration, the same principle holds true for intra-organizational collaboration. Determining when divisions within a given organization need to collaborate to solve a problem requires the same diagnosis: how well do the demands of the problem match the capabilities of the unit?

It is also quite possible that collaboration will be required to simply reach a thorough understanding of the problem to begin with. Collecting information from multiple sources is essential to developing a deep understanding of problems that involve multiple parties (Gray, 1989). Problems in education are rarely isolated to a single individual or organization, making collaboration all the more necessary.
Implication for Site

The analysis of this capstone leads to three main implications for the Forward Madison partnership, including creating a shared agenda for joint work, appreciating the complex demands of partnership leadership, and continuing to build organizational systems and structures in service of partnership goals.

Creating a Shared Agenda for Joint Work

Mark Moore’s (2003) strategic triangle defines three interrelated elements for leaders of public institutions to consider: public value, operational capacity, and legitimacy and support. It is common for leaders to start by thinking about what public value they hope to create, and then building the operational capacity and legitimacy and support to make it happen. For mission driven organizations, this makes complete sense; the mission should drive the work.

However, in the context of a partnership, each organization might have a different conception of public value, along with different operational capacities and levels of legitimacy and support. Even if two organizations can agree on a common conception of the public value they hope to create, the operational capacity and legitimacy and support may not exist across both organizations.

When considering the focus for future work, Forward Madison might benefit from approaching the process backwards. Rather than first defining the specific public value they hope to create, they can start by exploring their current operational capacity and legitimacy and support. In the words of Mark Moore, the partnership can ask, “What
wants to happen here?” Given the unique operational capacities and levels of legitimacy and support of each organization, the partnership can identify promising avenues for future partnership work. This does not mean that each organization should not be first and foremost driven by its mission. Considering the public value each organization hopes to create is necessary for any strategic mission-driven organization.

However, when considering the specific work of the partnership, the organizations must find the unique intersection of public value that can be achieved by complementary capabilities and aligned levels of legitimacy and support. While it may seem natural to enter the conversation through big-picture aspirations, it might not prove very productive because of all of the other pieces that must line up first. Rather than starting the conversation by asking, “What should we do?,“ Forward Madison leaders can consider their capabilities and ask, “What are the things we are able to do?” Alternatively, they could consider each organization’s legitimacy and support within their authorizing environment and ask, “What are the things our community wants us to do?”

Considering Christensen and Kaufman’s (2008) organizational capabilities framework (i.e. resources, processes, and priorities), this process could be done by first exploring the resources and processes of each organization, not just the priorities. Obviously, the priorities of each organization will need to serve as an ultimate filter to help Forward Madison make prioritization decisions, but starting with priorities might not be as fruitful as first considering capabilities and the types of things for which there will be strong support.

Specifically, Forward Madison leadership can organize appreciative planning experiences to explore potential avenues for future work. According to Gray (1989), “The
primary function of appreciative planning is to compare the current state of affairs with a set of ideals” (p. 180). Appreciative planning is not about creating specific agreements between parties, but rather jointly engaging in inquiry about the problem through exercises such as search conferences or community gatherings (Gray, 1989). Appreciative planning exercises could provide Forward Madison leadership with a more complete understanding of the domain and the types of joint-efforts the community would likely support. Search conferences can help stakeholders identify the gap between the current state of affairs and a more idealized possible future state (Gray, 1989).

Furthermore, a diverse set of stakeholders from each organization and the community should be engaged during appreciative planning processes. Bringing more students, faculty, staff, and community members to the table will increase the likelihood of identifying appropriate and exciting opportunities for collaborative work. Ultimately, opportunities -- even those which the community supports and which the organizations are operationally capable of achieving -- will need to be filtered through the priorities of each organization before being pursued.

Successful collaboration, even on less sophisticated and ambitious endeavors, can lead to increased levels of legitimacy and support, as well as increased operational capacity. Accordingly, Forward Madison could continue to build its capability to take on ever-increasingly complex and ambitious goals.

**Leadership**

Partnership leadership roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined. Organizing partnership leadership roles into two categories could help provide clarity
around the different roles that different individuals must play in service of the partnership. Forward Madison should define their leadership roles with reference to the leadership categories discussed in the RKA: organization leader and partnership leader. This categorization would help each individual understand their unique contribution to the success of the partnership.

Adequate time and resources must be given to those assuming partnership leadership roles. True collaboration across two organizations takes a significant amount of time, patience, and creativity. Forward Madison leaders, while incredibly committed, are also incredibly busy. UW-SOE and MMSD leadership must be mindful to match the expectations they have for the partnership with the resources they provide it. The recent decision to create a Forward Madison Director role, chiefly responsible for leading the partnership, is an indication that UW-SOE and MMSD are willing and eager to make this commitment. This is a promising sign for the partnership’s future.

UW-SOE and MMSD leadership must also be mindful of where they “house” the partnership within each organization. Even within a given organization, different capabilities exist within different departments. As described in the RKA, an organization’s resources, process, and priorities define its capabilities (Christensen & Kaufman, 2008). The partnership should be housed in the part of each organization that has the capabilities that match its goals. In general, partnership leaders should consider the groups and individuals within each organization that can help give the partnership work the most leverage (Hora & Millar, 2011). Since Forward Madison’s goals may evolve overtime, UW-SOE and MMSD leadership must constantly re-evaluate the fit of the department in which Forward Madison is housed within each organization.
Build an Organization

A partnership faces strong, often competing, organizational forces that make collaboration difficult. These forces, described and analyzed in detail in this capstone, must be met by equally strong processes and structures. Gray (1989) believes that attending to process is critical for collaboration. “The importance of process cannot be overemphasized in planning and conducting successful collaborations. Good-faith efforts to undertake collaboration are often derailed because the parties are not skilled in the process and because insufficient attention is given to designing and managing a constructive process” (p. 93). Forward Madison should continue to develop strong processes that help organize the partnership to achieve its goals.

Both UW-SOE and MMSD have organizational processes, both explicit and implicit, that were designed, or have evolved, to complete certain organizational tasks. The processes required by Forward Madison will be unique from either organization’s processes, because Forward Madison strives for goals that are unique from each organization. Strong collaborative processes are able to maintain the unique capabilities and qualities of each party, while also providing a pathway towards co-creation. The purpose of structures and processes should not be to make MMSD more like UW-SOE or vice versa, but rather to preserve what is good from each organization, with the appropriate structure that allows for productive work to happen.

Forward Madison must be able to brainstorm and generate ideas, make decisions on what actions to take, develop systems to communicate, hold each other accountable, and learn from their experiences. While UW-SOE and MMSD already have processes to achieve these tasks within their own organizations, Forward Madison must manage its
own unique way of working. Ideally, this unique way of working will continue to draw upon the best aspects of each organization as they relate to achieving the partnership goals.

One such process could be a joint information search. A joint information search is a process where stakeholders research and examine information from multiple sources together. An effective joint information search can establish a common basis for future discussions, build relationships between parties, and broaden each stakeholder’s understanding of the problem (Gray, 1989). UW-SOE’s research and content expertise, coupled with MMSD’s sophisticated implementation monitoring systems that allow visibility into classroom teaching practice across the district, could create a ripe opportunity for a fruitful joint information search.
Implication for Sector

The decision of whether a district and university should partner is not merely a practical one, but a symbolic and political one as well. The decision involves practical considerations because of the unique capabilities from each organization that can be brought to bear on a common problem. The decision is symbolic and political because of the powerful message partnering can send to a community, and the entire field, regarding a shared and coordinated commitment to a joint problem. Both practical and symbolic factors should be considered when districts and universities contemplate a union. Finally, if and when a district and a university choose to partner, they must adopt a humble appreciation for the challenges that lie ahead, and prepare accordingly.

Practical

Collaboration is essential when an organization is unable to achieve its mission on its own. As Gray (1989) describes it, “Realistically, collaboration involves difficult issues that have often eluded simple solutions in the past” (p. 24). Given the ambitious goals and demanding challenges of most education organizations, it is hard to imagine an organization -- district or university -- that does not meet this criteria.

While the question of whether to collaborate may be clear, much less clear is “with whom?” and “around what?” Collaboration can be a powerful tool to solve problems when two organizations with complementary capabilities come together. While capabilities are usually seen in terms of tangible resources or what an organization can do, capabilities also exist in what an organization knows or how it thinks. Making
progress on an organization’s more ambitious goals may require a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the problem they are trying to solve. In this case, partnering with an organization that sees the problem in a different way can prove valuable. Gray (1989) describes how multiple stakeholders with different perceptions of a problem can help each other learn. “Each holds assumptions, beliefs, and viewpoints that are consistent with their independent efforts to confront the problem. Through collaboration these multiple perspectives are aired and debated and gradually a more complete appreciation of the complexity of the problem is constructed” (Gray, 1989, p. 14).

Practically speaking, there are several processes and protocols that can be used by a diverse set of stakeholders to deepen their understanding of a problem. These processes broadly fit under the idea of conducting a causal system analysis, which engages stakeholders in an investigation of why a system produces the results it does (Bryk et al., 2015). These processes can include identifying a specific problem to solve, asking a series of “why?” questions, creating a fishbone diagram that visually represents the factors that contribute to the problem, and developing a system improvement map that represents the organizational subsystems of an institution that are relevant to the problem (Bryk et al., 2015).

Engaging in collective processes that help uncover a problem also allows for organizations and individuals to identify and accept their contribution to the problem. Heifetz et al. (2009b) argue that “unspeakable loyalties” can get in the way of achieving goals, so it is important to identify them. Kegan and Lahey (2001) refer to a similar concept by the name of “competing commitments” (p. 49), which are commitments we
have that work against our espoused goals; these commitments may be difficult to identify, as well as admit. Surfacing these unspeakable loyalties or competing commitments can be an uncomfortable process. “You are identifying, and accepting responsibility for, your role in getting in the way of the progress you say you are trying to achieve” (p. 192).

Beyond contributions to the problem, potential partners can uncover their motivations and interests for engaging in joint work. Hora and Millar (2011) argue that discussing motivations and interests is a crucial step in pre-partnership planning. In addition to understanding your (and your organization’s) contribution to the problem, potential partners must also consider how well they can identify and articulate their motivation to collaborate. As referenced in the RKA, Hora and Millar (2011) warn of the danger of partners who have too little or too much self-interest in partnering.

When evaluating the practical value of a potential partnership, organizations should assess the extent to which the partner candidate will enhance their shared ability to achieve their respective missions, either through what each organization can do, or by how each organization thinks and sees the world.

**Political and Symbolic**

Beyond the practical utility of partnering, partner organizations and their leaders can earn political and symbolic value from a partnership. I believe that people find comfort and satisfaction knowing that significant institutions in their community are working together for the betterment of the community. This comfort and satisfaction can be translated into improved legitimacy and support for each organization and its leaders.
This improved legitimacy and support can prove helpful in other ways.

When a district and a university partner, they have the power to communicate a strong message to their community and to the field about the nature of their work and the challenge of their goals. Even partnerships that are established for largely political or symbolic purposes must engage in some level of negotiation to define their collective purpose to external stakeholders. This negotiation of purpose can be a valuable exercise, particularly for two organizations that traditionally think and act differently. Partner organizations can engage in a causal system analysis, as described above, to help define their purpose. Even in situations where organizations are not naturally inclined to cooperate, skillful third parties can help organizations recognize their interdependence and use shuttle diplomacy to define a problem to the satisfaction of both parties (Gray, 1989).

Partnering also has the effect of externally communicating an appreciation for the complexities of the problems by illustrating the need for coordination. If more institutions and organizations expressed such an appreciation, perhaps quicker progress would be made on society's most pressing problems. A district-university partnership could provide a symbolic commitment to shared ownership over shared problems, a commitment that other organizations may eventually take up.

**Building Collaborative Capacity**

Those who aspire to engage in district-university partnership work must be prepared to meet complex challenges. While education problems worthy of collaboration are not new, our sector’s capabilities for collaboration are still rather young. These
capabilities rest in powerful processes and skillful leadership.

**Powerful Processes.** Gray (1989) outlines three phases to the collaborative process: problem setting, direction setting, and implementation. Since each phase has a different set of outcomes, different processes and structures may be required. For example, in the problem setting phase, partners must reach a common definition of the problem and establish a commitment to collaborate (Gray, 1989). To do this, partners can engage in processes related to a causal system analysis.

In the direction setting phase, collaborators begin to identify their common purpose and possible options (Gray, 1989). This can be done by utilizing subgroups to explore specific issues, conducting joint information searchers, and generating options (Gray, 1989). The implementation phase involves carrying out the agreement that was reached during the direction setting phase. For collaborations more broadly, Gray (1989) recognizes that creating a temporary organization may be necessary to oversee implementation. Indeed, Hora and Millar (2011) argue that partnerships have similarities to start-up companies because of their initial lack of structure. Consequently, partnership leaders must define goals and then create roles, responsibilities, and organizational processes and structures organized in service of those goals.

**Skillful Leadership.** The analysis section detailed how a district-university partnership creates a complex context for leadership. In such a context, leaders must draw from a broad set of skills and tools in order to be successful. Leaders must be able to work effectively without a traditional hierarchical structure, facilitate effective inter-organizational collaboration, have the organizational know-how to build systems and structures in service of goals, manage the emotionally challenging change process, and
lead a learning organization.

**Work effectively without traditional hierarchical structure.** Even leaders that are highly effective within their home organization can struggle with partnership work. The rules of the game are different when collaborating across organizations. As Gray (1989) notes, “To be successful, coordination must be accomplished laterally without the hierarchical authority to which most managers are accustomed” (p. 9).

**Facilitate effective inter-organizational collaboration.** Partnership leaders must ensure productive inter-organizational collaboration. In fact, Hora and Millar (2011) recommend finding a skilled third-party facilitator who can help manage pre-partnership planning meetings. As the work continues, however, partnership leaders themselves will likely have to ensure that productive engagement continues. In this sense, partnership leaders may find themselves assuming some of the responsibilities of a mediator. Gray (1989) outlines several tasks of a mediator, including assessing overall readiness to collaborate, getting the parties to the table, minimizing resistance, ensuring effective representation, establishing a climate of trust, modeling openness, optimism, and perseverance, designing and managing the negotiation process, managing data, and getting consensus (p. 166).

**Build organizational systems and structures.** Partnership leaders must be comfortable and adept at working in the sometimes chaotic early phases of a start-up company. The unpredictable nature of partnership work favors individuals with adaptive expertise who are able to craft solutions to new challenges and opportunities (Hora & Millar, 2011). Partnership leaders who are unilaterally focused on the content of the partnership may struggle in their role as a partnership leader. In fact, Hora and Millar
(2011) argue that leaders often fail to pay enough attention to the partnership structures and processes that make the content of the partnership possible.

*Manage the change process.* While developing new and unique partnership ways of working can have significant benefits with regard to achieving goals, adapting to change can be difficult for individuals. The challenge of leading work that requires people to engage in processes that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable cannot be trivialized. Asking individuals to change is no small request, and may be met with resistance. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), “Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people’s habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures” (p. 30). Therefore, leaders must be particularly in tune with the emotional load they are asking themselves and their team to carry. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) recommend to “pace the work” (p. 116) to avoid moving quicker than the organization can sustain.

*Lead a learning organization.* Finally, partnership leaders must have an acute ability to lead a learning organization. Various researchers suggest that learning is essential for all organizations (Argyris, 1992; Edmondson, 2008; Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008). Due to the emergent nature of a partnership, a leader’s ability to lead a learning organization seems particularly relevant for the success of a partnership. Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino (2008) argue that the “building blocks of the learning organization” include a supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes and practices, and leadership behaviors that reinforce learning (p. 110). Furthermore, when considering the learning capabilities of an organization, Edmonson (2008) distinguishes between “Execution-as-Efficiency” and “Execution-as-Learning.” In an Execution-as-
Efficiency approach, optimal work processes are established in advance and change infrequently. In contrast, an Execution-as-Learning approach establishes tentative processes that continue to develop over time (Edmonson, 2008). The ability to lead with an Execution-as-Learning approach would be particularly relevant for partnership leaders as partners experiment and learn how to work and collaborate effectively.

With respect to organizational learning, Argyris (1993) distinguishes between “double-loop” and “single-loop” learning. According to Argyris, “Whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system (be it individual, group, intergroup, organizational or inter-organizational), the learning is single-loop” (p. 8). While single-loop learning is fitting for routine issues, double-loop learning is relevant for more complex ones. Double-loop learning might be particularly relevant to partnerships due to the potential differences in underlying values of each partner’s systems. Indeed, Hora and Millar recommend clarifying each partner’s “theories of action” (i.e. a belief about how to address a problem and how individuals and organizations change) during the pre-partnership planning phase (pp. 74-75). The ability to facilitate this exploration undoubtedly requires strong leadership skill with regard to organizational learning.

Accordingly, the significant leadership demands on partnership leaders should encourage the education sector to welcome individuals with a diverse set of experiences and competencies that will make successful collaborations more likely. As outlined above, clearly more than expertise and experience in education is necessary for an aspiring education partnership leader. Individuals with deep knowledge of how to design
collaborative processes, such as negotiators, experts at mergers and acquisitions, entrepreneurs who have built start-ups, and leaders with experience in design processes may have a lot to offer district-university partnerships. While expertise in education is essential, it is not sufficient. Perhaps just as important for someone tasked with designing and leading a district-university partnership is the ability to design an organization capable of leveraging others’ expertise.
Conclusion

School districts and universities both play important functions in our society. While their educational missions have many similarities, they have no shortage of differences as organizations. Although these differences are what make partnering difficult, they are also what make partnering promising. Strong interdependencies between districts and universities ultimately require each to rely on the other. The promise of collaboration is that two organizations can come together to achieve something that neither could achieve on its own. The challenging and stubborn problems in American education, and society more broadly, make partnerships an appealing promise. Consequently, partnerships between districts and universities, whether formal or informal, are common.

What is also common, however, is the challenge of making them work effectively. While the complementary resources, areas of expertise, and ways of thinking and working provide a fertile ground for collaboration, they also create a remarkably demanding and complex context for leadership. Partnership leaders must not only be adept at navigating within their own context, but also must have an understanding and appreciation for their partner’s context. Furthermore, partnership leaders must see themselves as building an entirely new organization, one that is powerful enough to leverage the strengths and resources of each organization. The processes and structures within this new organization will necessarily look different than the processes and structures of either partner organization, because the partnership is pursuing a different purpose.
Partnership leaders must be equipped with a broad set of skills that are effective for inter-organizational work. Concepts from organizational design and leadership, negotiation, and mergers and acquisitions are not particularly common to the education field but could be extremely helpful to a person assuming a partnership leadership role.

My experience working with Forward Madison was both exciting and humbling, promising and confounding, and inspiring and daunting. I came into my residency with a firm belief that districts and universities must collaborate better, and a naive confusion about why so many choose not to. While my belief in the importance of partnering remains firm, I have developed a much stronger understanding for why it is so difficult. However, the very things that make collaborating difficult are the same things that make the potential for collaboration so valuable. My experience with Forward Madison provided a powerful example that went beyond mere promise. The impressive, intensive, and consequential work of the partnership demonstrates that districts and universities can indeed collaborate for the betterment of their students and community.

Collaboration is grounded in the idea that diversity of ideas and perspectives is an asset for problem solving. For most of the problems we face in the field of education, and indeed the world, we have yet to see one organization capable of addressing them alone. But the fact that we know we need each other is not enough. We must also develop the capacity to work together.
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Appendices

Appendix A: District-University Partnership Model
Appendix B: Recommendation Feedback Protocol

Forward Madison
Initial Recommendations - Feedback Session

Agenda
- 1 Minute - Review Agenda
- 10 Minutes - Overview of Process, District-University Partnership Conceptual Model and SWOT analysis
- 9 Minutes - Share and discuss Key Strategies and proposed Partnership Model
- 30 Minutes - Share and discuss recommendations (page by page)
- 10 Minutes - Additional Discussion

For each agenda item:
- What are you most excited about and why?
- What are you most concerned about and why?
  - What/whose interests are missing?
  - What additional or different ideas do you have?

We can discuss AND please feel free to jot notes on your packet.