
Field Catalyst Staffing: Building and Sustaining a Team of Bridgers and Organizers

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It's not new or controversial to say "people matter" when talking about organizational impact. But the type of work field catalysts do is unique and thus their staffing¹ needs are, too. As the authors of a [2023 report by The Bridgespan Group](#) noted, "The talent needed for field catalyst work thinks differently than those who scale direct-service models. Instead, talent needs to be comfortable designing ecosystem-level approaches and adapting strategies to changing environments." In addition, field catalysts' work evolves dynamically in response to changes in the fields in which they are operating; thus, their staffing needs can shift significantly over time, too.

Because these types of entities are relatively uncommon compared to other social sector organizations, few traditional roles prepare someone to work for a field catalyst, and even fewer resources exist to support their training, development, and advancement in such organizations. Moreover, search firms may be less experienced in recruiting and evaluating potential candidates. [And the promising candidates may very well be overlooked](#) because of the way they (intentionally) operate skillfully behind the scenes and often have less traditional, well-defined roles and fields in which they work.

THREE LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Field catalysts need to hire and cultivate key skills and mindsets that differ in focus and intensity from more traditional social sector models.**
- 2. The field catalyst skill set cannot be overlooked nor under-resourced; to be successful, field catalysts must cultivate and sufficiently staff this capacity.**
- 3. Developing and retaining staff and consultants well-aligned to the field catalyst role is vital; find ways within lean teams to provide creative growth opportunities, mitigate burnout risks, and support generous flexibility and compensation.**

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¹ In the context of this piece, I am considering "talent" and "staffing" holistically and thinking about the capacity provided by both full-time employees and consultants.

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

Student Experience Research Network (SERN; formerly Mindset Scholars Network) worked from 2015 to 2023 to cultivate understanding and awareness of how structures in education shape students' experience of respect as valued people and thinkers in school in ways that meaningfully impact their learning and well-being. In partnership with a community of 42 researcher members ("SERN scholars") and over 500 actors across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy, SERN bridged long-standing silos to build and mobilize practically relevant research knowledge.

[SERN served as a field-building intermediary](#), performing a [behind-the-scenes function essential to advancing systems change](#) that has been conceptualized as a "field catalyst,"

although it also goes by other names. Such field-building efforts are often overlooked and under-resourced by funders because they do not fit the mental model of a typical nonprofit. This type of work brings with it a unique set of strategic and organizational needs. This piece is part of a series developed following SERN's strategic sunset in 2023 with the intention of documenting some of SERN's core strategic and organizational practices and lessons learned as a field catalyst. Our hope is that these pieces will contribute to the emergent knowledge base about field catalysts and be of value to others serving in field catalyst roles and those who partner with them.

EXAMPLES AND RESOURCES LINKED IN THIS BRIEF

- [Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World](#) and [Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders](#); reports featuring research by The Bridgespan Group on how funders can support field catalysts and how field catalysts originate
- [Invisible Landscapes](#); an article in Orion Magazine about how a recently named organ called the interstitium can help us think differently about the world and the role of bridgers in keeping systems healthy and in communication
- [SERN's organizational chart](#)
- [Reflections from a Strategic Sunset](#); an article on why and how SERN engaged in a strategic sunset in 2023
- [Sample job description from SERN](#) (2021)
- [SERN competency map](#) for all role levels across the organization
- [Example from our annual funder briefing resource suite](#) illustrating how SERN reflected on and learned from participant feedback
- [The Management Center](#) trainings, tools, and resources related to people and project management
- SERN's [tool for tracking and managing organizational relationships and assessing progress on leading indicators](#) toward our impact goals
- SERN's [tool for organizing external communications and engagement](#) as part of its strategic sunset
- [Sharing Power in Philanthropic Relationships to Enhance Impact](#); a brief documenting SERN's lessons learned about engaging with our philanthropic partners and regranteeing funds



Field catalyst leaders have made it clear that talent is an urgent concern. That same 2023 Bridgespan study analyzed the experiences of about 100 field catalysts across a diverse array of fields and countries spanning the Global North and South. When asked to name the top three barriers to achieving their population-level impact goals, leaders named two challenges far more often than any other: 70 percent reported insufficient long-term, flexible funding and 57 percent reported significant capacity challenges.

The SERN team was highly accomplished, productive, and small. Our staff brought valuable expertise spanning the research, practice, policy, and philanthropic sectors and were committed and talented. They held high standards for their work and a consistent orientation toward serving our community. From the beginning, we also worked closely with consultants who came to understand our work and community to further enhance our capacity as our work evolved. Low turnover among our staff and repeat consulting relationships were a major asset.

Nonetheless, finding and developing staff for the unique skill set we needed was an ongoing challenge. Moreover, staff transition-focused activities like onboarding, succession planning, and staff leave coverage were complicated by the “high-context” and relationally-intensive nature of our work liaising with and organizing so many other actors in the field. It also took time to find

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and invest in consultants who understood and integrated well with our field-building work. As one of SERN’s funders noted in the third-party assessment of SERN’s impact, “[Most people] haven’t sat at that altitude and looked across the field and thought about strategy and how do we move the field... It’s really hard to find people who have this intersecting skill set.”

Absorbing consistent change was also hard on our [10-person staff](#). Our adaptiveness to field needs and opportunities left our team stretched thin, which made it difficult to recruit and train new people.

While we learned and improved over time, we did not solve the challenges of staffing a field catalyst organization effectively. Indeed, organizational capacity issues were one of multiple factors that contributed to the decision to [strategically sunset SERN](#).

Lesson 1

Field catalysts need to hire and cultivate key skills and mindsets that differ in focus and intensity from more traditional social sector models.

As SERN increasingly evolved into the field catalyst role, we got clearer on the unique skills we needed to hire for and develop. Some of the most important skills included:

Taking a relationships-first approach. This involves a high degree of empathy and taking both a human-centered *and* strategic approach to relationships. It required careful planning and coordination with multiple staff internally to ensure we cultivated and activated relationships coherently over dozens of touchpoints—large and small—over periods of several years.

Ability to understand and bridge effectively between the cultural contexts of different sectors.

Field building requires skillful boundary spanning. This is an asset that many people naturally develop, especially those who learn to navigate disparate social worlds, but it is not formally cultivated or recognized in many professional contexts. Even as we recruited specific topical expertise, we sought people who demonstrated a commitment and skill in bridging to other domains.

Attunement to ecosystems and power. Field building entails a sophisticated understanding of a large, diverse group of actors and the underlying power dynamics and structures that shape how they interact. Field building in service of equitable

systems change requires skill in knowing how to counter traditional power dynamics and build power. SERN staff thought about these dynamics in detail at both the micro and macro level—from seating and speaking arrangements at events and whose work we cited in what contexts to how we strategically used regrants.

Skill in organizing and coalition building. In SERN's case, this looked like being able to map relevant people and organizations, understand their interests and potential connections to the field, and create the conditions and opportunities to build strategic alliances and narratives.

Effective listening and communications skills that build shared meaning, buy in, and alignment.

Strong listening and communications skills are vital in any organization. They are particularly important for field catalysts as they try to connect and organize diverse actors, build coherence and shared agendas across silos, and explain their unusual function to people who may not understand them or may even see them as a threat. It was essential for SERN staff to pay careful attention to communications in their daily work and understand how it contributed to our impact.

We also learned that skills aren't the only important factor. Certain beliefs and orientations were essential to operating effectively as a field catalyst. As Kasthuri Soni, CEO of Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, a field catalyst that works on youth unemployment in South Africa and Rwanda is quoted in another [report by Bridgespan in 2023](#), "Our mantra is to stay in love with the problem, not our solution—we shift and shape to what is needed."



SERN, too, found our work needed to evolve significantly—multiple times—over the course of our organizational trajectory in order to meet the needs of the field. This required selecting for and cultivating certain orientations among our staff individually and collectively as a team, including:

A strong service and growth orientation. It was vital that SERN’s leadership and staff were seen as acting on behalf of the broader field rather than any individual or group—or advancing SERN’s organizational interests at the expense of the field. Staff needed to model a learning orientation, including acknowledging mistakes and regularly seeking and acting on feedback. In addition to helping us improve our work over time, this built trust and credibility within our ever-expanding community. Staff also needed to have a pulse on what the field was thinking and doing, which required humility and constant listening and learning.

Flexibility and adaptability. In addition to being willing to adjust to unexpected challenges and opportunities, SERN’s work required commensurate skill in effectively scoping projects and work planning so that it was possible to be nimble.

Underlying these skills and orientations is an understanding that while *what* we did as an organization was important, *how* we did it—and how we showed up in the field and with partners—mattered just as much if not more.

Comfort with ambiguity and complexity. Our work had to be dynamic and responsive to significant shifts in our field and society; this meant it was always evolving. SERN’s work also involved theories of change and impact goals focused on systems change. Our staff thus needed comfort with ambiguity and a willingness to grapple with long time horizons and complexity.

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Lesson 2

The field catalyst skill set cannot be overlooked nor under-resourced; to be successful, field catalysts must cultivate and sufficiently staff this capacity.

Like many others, we learned the hard way that core field catalyst functions like regularly engaging with a wide range of people in the field and cultivating vital long-term relationships requires dedicated capacity; it's not something that can be outsourced or treated as a side job. It also requires supportive organizational processes as well as investments in staff to develop key skills and orientations individually and collectively.

Below are some examples of how we learned to build this capacity internally. Hiring a director of operations and strategy who had a keen eye for talent development, people management, and organizational culture was essential to making progress in all of these areas.

Integrate into hiring, onboarding, and development of staff. We increasingly sought these attributes in hiring staff, including them in [job descriptions](#) and assessing via interview processes, as well as in the consultants we engaged. Our onboarding process included giving everyone a foundational understanding of our field-building work, the function of field catalysts, and key developments in our field, in addition to planning thoughtful handoffs of organizational relationships to new staff. We also built these attributes into our [SERN-wide competency map](#) in 2021. We asked ourselves, for example, what it looked like to steward our organizational relationships across all roles. We wove these attributes into our updated performance review forms, used coaching, and built explicit opportunities to practice these core competencies into scoping projects and work plans.

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Create a model that includes extensive use of consultants. In addition to full-time staff, consultants were a key ingredient in our model; we worked closely with them and integrated them into our internal processes. They provided targeted capacity and flexible skill sets, especially as our work evolved dynamically, and our team learned a great deal from their expertise and experience. We often worked with the same consultants repeatedly, which helped them build relevant context and relationships over time. Working with consultants also revealed priorities for future hires by illustrating how specific skill sets and experience accelerated our work and the most critical gaps in our team's existing capabilities.

Cultivate a learning-oriented culture. We developed routines for gathering and reflecting on feedback as part of [debriefing](#) and celebrating the conclusion of major events and programs. We also used team spaces to share and discuss what we were learning from engaging with actors inside and beyond our field, whether from conversations, conferences, readings, or webinars.



Create targeted opportunities for building skills and experience.

In later years, we invested in developing our team’s project scoping and planning capabilities. Our goal was both to create more sustainable, effective workflows and also improve our entire team’s skill in field-level strategy and our ability to adapt. This included sending our full team to [The Management Center](#) trainings and using their free online resources. We also created opportunities in our 2020 strategy implementation for our entire staff to participate in developing and piloting project concepts aligned to what they had observed as field needs.

Develop tools. In addition to off-the-shelf solutions like CRM software, we built bespoke internal tools and processes that met our relationship management needs, including periodic [organizational relationship reviews](#) to which all staff contributed. As part of our strategic sunset, we leveraged our team’s strong project planning skill set and created a [new tool](#) to track intensive field-level engagement spanning multiple projects and teams within our organization that had the potential to overwhelm and frustrate partners without thoughtful coordination and advance planning.

Improve time budgeting. As we grew our “tent” and increasingly engaged in field catalyst work, we realized we needed to better account for the time spent on engagement and relationships. This meant

increasingly accounting for this time in annual staffing projections and sometimes scaling back programmatic work.

Funders can support leaders in addressing capacity issues by providing flexible funding, enabling access to coaching, modeling a learning orientation, and partnering with field catalyst leaders to develop these skills and attributes. Our piece on [sharing power in philanthropic relationships to enhance impact](#) shares lessons learned from how we engaged with SERN’s funders that may be relevant to both funders and nonprofit leaders.

Lesson 3

Developing and retaining staff and consultants well-aligned to the field catalyst role is vital; find ways within lean teams to provide creative growth opportunities, mitigate burnout risks, and support generous flexibility and compensation.

Everyone we hired at SERN was talented, accomplished, and contributed to our mission in important ways. As we evolved into our field catalyst role, however, some staff and consultants thrived more than others. We quickly learned that

it was important to develop and retain staff and consultants who demonstrated strong alignment with the skills and orientations necessary in a field catalyst organization because it was hard to find and intensive to develop.

Here are some steps we took to do so, underscoring again that this was a learning process and we definitely had not solved this by the time we sunset:

Create development and growth opportunities.

Our organization was small and lean and that was both by necessity (given funding) and design (given how much our work changed over time). Everyone learned and flexed and stretched in roles. But it became clear that we needed to create more formal opportunities for development and growth in staff's roles. This was one of the reasons behind developing the [competency map](#), differentiating levels between roles (i.e., adding a "senior" level for junior and mid-level role categories), and creating formal promotion pathways. We also thought about this in the context of designing and staffing projects; we created specific opportunities in projects that aligned with individuals' interests and goals.

Take steps to mitigate burnout risks. The risk for burnout can be heightened given the particularly dynamic and complex work in organizations that serve as field catalysts and the [general under-resourcing of their work](#). There was more to be done but some steps we took included monitoring indicators of burnout via organizational surveys and in staff's check-ins with their managers and adjusting project scopes and staffing in response to staff's regular feedback to the organization on performance reviews. We added consultants to expand capacity. We also asked staff to report their actual hours worked so that we could determine whether efforts to improve workloads were having the desired effect.

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Create flexibility and compensate staff well to support recruitment and retention. SERN always benefited from having a remote staffing model, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed us to recruit widely and gave staff more flexibility in when, where, and how they worked. We increasingly prioritized using our resources to pay staff well and to benchmark salaries against similar *types* of work even when there were not exact *organizational* benchmarks. In crafting a new compensation policy and conducting equity audits of our compensation with the support of an external firm, we created salary benchmarks using organizations spanning multiple sectors and in some cases, multiple roles to craft salary targets. For example, we realized that it would be insufficient to benchmark our organization against education nonprofits or academic institutions alone; our team was also engaged in work that was similar to that of foundations and consulting firms. Incorporating these additional benchmarks raised the salaries we paid staff. In our compensation policy, we prioritized rewarding length of tenure at SERN because we knew that developing deep institutional and field knowledge and relationships was essential to our impact as a field catalyst. We also used organization-wide bonuses because the nature of our work was highly collaborative and required cross-functional partnerships within the organization to achieve impact.