
BUILDing for Growth Year 2 Report



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Prepared by
La Piana
CONSULTING

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BUILDing for Growth Organizations

“ Every aspect of what has been offered has been incredibly valuable to us and to me personally. Working with La Piana has really transformed us. ”

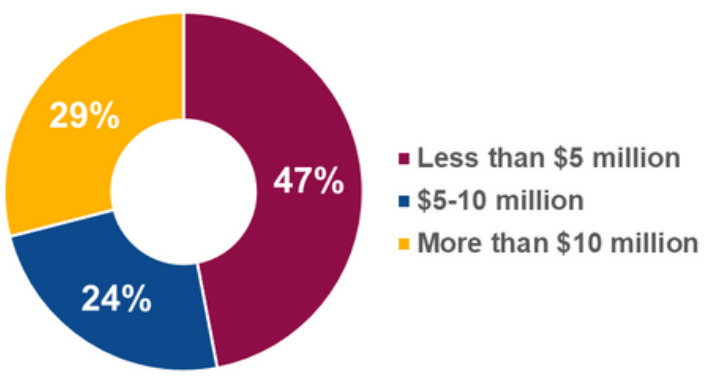
“ The overall engagement was great. I love how the workshops were structured...The Community of Practice was also engaging. Participants were free to express what was bothering them and possible solutions for a troubling workspace. ”

“ The most helpful thing I found was being in space with other professionals in similar and different sized organizations, but hearing that we were all dealing with similar issues. This made me less stressed, reactive, and more responsive as these issues arose. ”

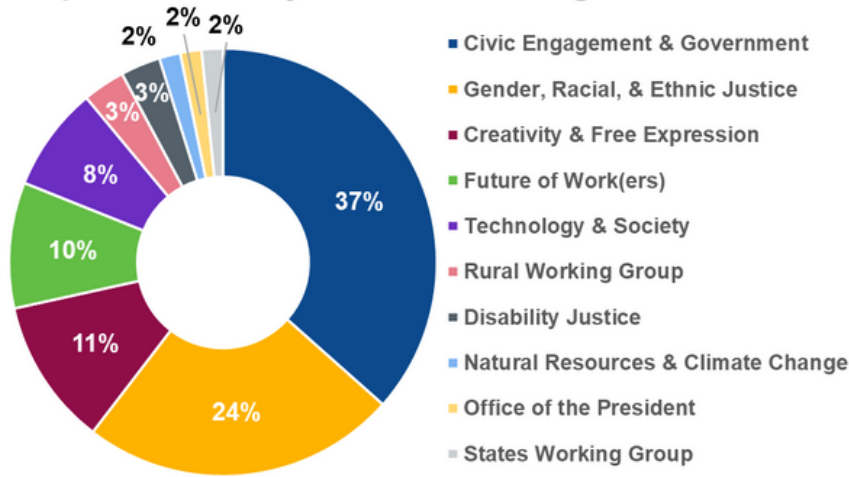
“ I have received so much from this experience and found it invaluable. I promoted the resources to my co-workers repeatedly. ”

Data on Participating Organizations

Budget Size of Participating Organizations



Representation by Ford BUILD* Program Area



*50 of the 63 participating organizations are BUILD grantees.

Introduction

BUILDing for Growth was initially created to respond to social justice nonprofits across the U.S. that experienced unprecedented and – in many cases – unexpected growth.

Growth, in this context, is defined as organizations that received windfall funding or saw a dramatic increase in funding over the last several years. This increase in funding was due to a variety of reasons, including large one-time gifts (e.g., Mackenzie Scott giving), grants for internal capacity building (e.g., the Ford Foundation's BUILD grant), and a surge in donations spurred by the increased visibility of political and social justice movements (this surge started as early as 2016 for some nonprofits, but it also accelerated for many in 2020).

Many participating organizations in BUILDing for Growth rapidly doubled or tripled in size, and this growth was accompanied by an increasing need for services and support related to many social justice issues, including reproductive justice, racial equity, and LGBTQIA+ rights.

The Ford Foundation's BUILD Program Officers had a hunch that many grantees were experiencing specific challenges related to rapid growth, so La Piana Consulting met with over 50 nonprofits experiencing growth in the summer of 2021 in order to understand their needs better.

In our interviews with these nonprofits, the same organizational challenges surfaced countless times, often accompanied by a feeling of isolation in going through this experience of rapid growth. To address these findings, we developed an evidence-based intervention, in collaboration with Ford's BUILD program, called BUILDing for Growth.

BUILDing for Growth was initially designed for 15 organizations, but we quickly found that demand was higher than anticipated. With Ford's support, participant size doubled to 30 organizations with an active waitlist of interested organizations. While the program was originally planned for one year, ending in June 2022, the need was such that we extended it another year in order to add 33 nonprofits to the original cohort.

By the program's close in June 2023, two years since its launch, over 60 nonprofits had participated in BUILDing for Growth.

Over the course of the program, participants most consistently underscored the importance of peer learning activities. In our Year 2 program exit survey, 100% of respondents offered unprompted written responses that peer learning was the most helpful thing about the BUILDing for Growth. **Above all things, we found that creating purposeful space for leaders to engage in thought partnership, share challenges openly, and discuss potential solutions in depth was extremely beneficial,** particularly for Executive Directors and Chief Financial Officers.

Our findings show that peer learning is most successful with:

- Consistent attendance
- Facilitated sessions
- Thematic learning
- Setting group norms
- Self-enrollment
- Curated resources
- Participants sharing similar responsibilities in their organizations



Program Design

Similar to Year 1 of BUILDing for Growth, all new organizations went through an intake process prior to the launch of Year 2 in order to ensure that the programming was rooted in evidence and informed by real-time challenges. All of the rapid growth challenges that were identified in Year 1 (seen in the lower right image) were confirmed as still being highly present in Year 2.

A few notable differences from the Year 2 intakes that were not present in Year 1 were concerns over:

- **Leadership transitions**, as many nonprofit leaders are retiring or leaving the field, and leadership teams were feeling unprepared
- The **negative impact of the economy** on organizations and concerns around staffing and financial sustainability
- A growing number of nonprofits that were **unionizing and the impact the process has on the organization**, particularly as it relates to maintaining strong organizational culture

Rapid Growth Challenges

STAFF

- Building and maintaining organizational culture
- Naming and prioritizing needs
- Building skills and leadership development for managers
- Establishing effective decision-making processes
- Preparing for leadership transitions
- Addressing burnout
- Effective change management to navigate ongoing pivots

SYSTEMS

- Responding to high HR needs
- Finding the right organizational structure and adding mid-level management
- Updating and expanding operations and systems
- Ensuring strong internal communication
- Preparing for long-term financial sustainability beyond a specific donation bump

Most Commonly Mentioned Challenges During Year 2 Intake



HR needs have increased, while HR departments have not grown



Managing organizational culture during periods of change



Updating systems, processes, and operations to manage growth



Staff and leadership turnover, and the impact of transitions



Generational challenges



Burnout among staff



Effective internal communications and transparent decision making

Program Design

BUILDing for Growth's 4-Tiered Approach



Based on our experience and participant feedback from Year 1, we made critical changes in how Year 2 was executed. While we provided Communities of Practice, workshops, and one-on-one consulting hours in Year 1, we decided to add Learning Communities as a fourth component of Year 2 programming. In order to plan programming and curated resources for the different issues covered, we also organized Year 2 in line with specific themes that rotated each month. These monthly themes were directly informed by our intake findings, with issue areas of highest concern being addressed first. Finally, in Year 2, we launched a monthly newsletter for participants as a way to share resources related to the monthly themes, announce and send reminders about upcoming events, and spotlight the variety of ways that participants were engaging in the program. **The addition of Learning Communities, monthly themes, and a program newsletter were invaluable to increasing engagement and connection with Year 2 participants.**

Year 2 Monthly Themes



Learning Communities

>1/3 of all BUILDing for Growth orgs participated in Learning Communities

In BUILDing for Growth Year 2, La Piana launched Learning Communities, a new program enabling participants to dig deeper into specific organizational challenges in a small-group setting (ideally no larger than 15 participants). **Each of the three Learning Communities was focused on a topic that emerged as a top issue for rapid growth organizations** – staff retention, storytelling for narrative change, and leadership transition planning.

Facilitated by Senior Consultant Christine Chen, each Learning Community met three times over the course of six weeks for 60-90-minute sessions and, through learning and sharing, focused on encouraging participants to put ideas into action in real time. With the supporting guidance of the community's facilitator and peers, participants were able to implement manageable changes at their organization, craft stories for communication, and create tangible leadership transition plans. In each Learning Community, participants were eager to share resources, successes, pitfalls, and learnings with their group. **Across the Learning Communities, the participants represented 22 BUILDing for Growth organizations.** Details and takeaways from each Learning Community are described below.

Learning Community Engagement

Staff Retention

10

participants & orgs represented

8

Authentic & Impactful Storytelling

16

participants & orgs represented

10

Proactive Planning for Leadership Transitions

9

participants & orgs represented

7

1. Staff Retention (Nov-Dec 2022)

The participants in our Staff Retention Learning Community learned and **put into action a “Plan-Do-Study-Act” (PDSA) model to enact a small test of change that would address a staff retention challenge** at their organization. A pre-session survey uplifted top concerns of organizational resiliency in the face of turnover and managing conflicting expectations based on generational, length of tenure, and remote/in person differences.

Some tests of change that were implemented by participants include:

- Launching new initiatives in **professional development and trainings that better engaged mid-level managers**
- **Testing a new mentorship program model** with a small group before rolling out more widely
- Incorporating **new elements into onboarding** processes
- **Auditing meeting schedules** and shortening the default length of all check-in meetings
- Redirecting decision-making flow to **encourage leadership development & succession preparation**

Learning Communities

Narrative is critical to the work that we do at Justice for Migrant Women. We've used the skills that we built through the Learning Community to shape the outreach necessary to achieving our mission of ensuring that migrant and rural women can live with dignity and safety.

- Rocío Magali Maciel and Catherine Hinshaw

2. Authentic & Impactful Storytelling (Feb-March 2023)

The second Learning Community addressed **the expressed need rapid growth organizations have faced around shifting and pivoting their narrative to communicate changes internally and externally**. Over the course of the three sessions, a group of participants discussed how to effectively and ethically craft authentic stories; planned how and who to tell these stories to; workshopped ideas with a partner; and shared these stories for group feedback. This Learning Community was slightly re-designed based on feedback from our first one to include shorter sessions with some guest speakers, paired up “homework” for accountability and peer learning, and ongoing “office hours” to address organization-specific topics.



The April edition of our **BUILDing for Growth newsletter** featured a participant spotlight from two Justice for Migrant Women leaders who participated in this Learning Community.

3. Proactive Planning for Leadership Transitions: Capacity Building, Leadership Development, & Succession (April-May 2023)

In the final Learning Community, participants, including executive directors, senior level leaders, and even a board member, grappled with succession planning. The group walked through an organizational assessment; named and talked through obstacles and fears associated with broaching the topic; discussed how to create a culture and processes for ongoing leadership development; and learned about how to manage and implement change once a leadership transition is imminent. While some leaders were focused on preparing for an impending transition, others attended with a goal of building a stronger leadership pipeline and day-to-day culture of resiliency.

Below are some key observations and questions that arose in this Learning Community:

- **Succession is still a taboo, emotionally charged topic** that makes everyone at least a little uneasy
- **Most organizations that participated did not have a basic continuity of operations plan**, but have since planned to put one in place for immediate emergency succession needs
- Several organizations are **considering a move from a singular-leader model into a distributed leadership model**, recognizing that the current model is unsustainable due to “job creep” and inevitable burnout of current leaders who have taken on too much
- Is the wave of leadership transitions a function of pandemic value shifting, Boomer retirements, or something else? **Will succession planning begin to look different moving forward?**

Communities of Practice

>2/3 of all BUILDing for Growth orgs participated in Communities of Practice

In Year 2 of BUILDing for Growth, La Piana continued to facilitate monthly Community of Practice (CoP) spaces, which were a cornerstone of the BUILDing for Growth program. There were 6 CoPs in Year 2, running from October 2022-May 2023. They provided participants with the opportunity to engage peers with similar job titles from across the cohort to discuss organizational challenges and exchange resources and support. **Over 8 months, we counted 565 instances of participation from 146 individuals across 43 BUILDing for Growth organizations.** CoPs averaged about 12 participants per session, with the Emerging Leaders, Operations, and People and Culture groups drawing the highest number of participants.

To facilitate scheduling and provide intimate conversation spaces, each CoP had two co-leading La Piana consultants to facilitate the conversations in Year 2. Sessions began with a full-group check-in around the stated monthly theme, then two breakout spaces were created to facilitate small group sharing. The CoP groups, descriptions, and co-leaders are identified in the image to the right.

Development Leaders CoP led by Sylvia Kim (Senior Consultant) & David La Piana (Managing Partner) For individuals who hold the highest level fundraising role within their organization	Emerging Leaders CoP led by All Carella (Senior Consultant) & Christine Chen (Senior Consultant) For individuals who are new to a leadership role (3 years or less) within their organization	Executive Directors CoP led by Eileen Garcia (Senior Consultant) & Luis Vergara (Partner) For individuals who are Executive Director, CEO, &/or President of their organization
Finance Leaders CoP led by Lara Jakubowski (Partner) & Bral Spight (Senior Consultant) For individuals who hold the highest level finance role within their organization	Operations Leaders CoP led by Arnia Grashin (Senior Consultant) & Scott Cotenoff (Partner) For individuals who hold the highest level operations role within their organization	People & Culture Leaders CoP led by Onuka Ibe (Partner) & Humberto Camarena (Senior Consultant) For individuals who hold the highest level HR role within their organization

Running concurrently, La Piana held a monthly internal Community of Practice – dubbed the “meta-CoP” – in which all our consultants facilitating CoPs gathered to share findings and general observations across the BUILDing for Growth cohort. This internal space helped confirm CoP participant needs and surface ongoing challenges experienced by participants. Additionally, it allowed our team to tailor the support offered through the monthly newsletter and 1-on-1 consulting hours in alignment with participants’ key needs. Findings from the meta-CoP conversations are included in the Takeaways & Recommendations section of this report.

“I really enjoyed meeting people in the same position as me and hearing about their challenges and solutions to all sorts of similar things that are going on within my own organization. The commiseration was super nice in and of itself...Being able to network with others outside of the Communities of Practice is a nice bonus.”

Communities of Practice

I am grateful for the level of sharing that has been the norm, with respect to experiences, suggestions, and tools/templates. People are engaged, and I think having organizations at different stages is beneficial.

This has been a great experience getting to hear how others approach different challenges or where to find resources and tips. I've also enjoyed making connections and finding ways to network outside of the scheduled group sessions.

Below are some key findings related to the Communities of Practice:

- For those who opted into a CoP, it is an **invaluable and unique space, because it can be lonely to hold a leadership role**. This sentiment held especially true in the Executive Directors CoP.
- Participants shared that **hearing peers express similar challenges was a significant value** and helpful for feeling like they are not alone.
- Many participants reported that they were **connecting with each other outside of the CoP space** to continue engaging.
- **In the Operations CoP, everyone had different role descriptions** depending on the organization and their growth stage. Consequently, not every issue raised in the Operations CoP was something that every participant could relate to (e.g., some operations leaders were also in charge of HR, while others had no HR responsibilities because there was a designated HR person at their organization).
- There were **a few monthly themes that sparked significant conversations** across the CoPs and could warrant deeper exploration, as participants were eager to continue discussing these issues – **specifically, transparency, decision making, and burnout and staff retention**.



Midway through Year 2, La Piana launched a CoP survey to assess participant satisfaction and areas for improvement.

- **100%** of respondents indicated that their **CoP leads were effective** at facilitating the conversation
- **97%** of respondents found their **CoP engaging**
- **87%** of respondents indicated that the CoP had **helped them address a professional challenge**

When asked what they were getting out of the CoP...

- **73%** identified **tools and resources**
- **70%** identified **peer support**
- **50%** identified getting **feedback on a professional challenge**
- **28%** identified **professional networking**
- Additional written responses identified **exposure to new ideas and space to reflect**

The mid-year survey results to the left were confirmed in our program exit survey, which similarly noted peer support and tools and resources to be the most important takeaways.

Upon concluding the program, two Communities of Practice (Emerging Leaders and People and Culture) asked for online spaces to be created, so they could continue to connect and exchange information. For these CoPs, private LinkedIn groups were created and shared with participants.

Workshops

>70% of all BUILDing for Growth orgs participated in workshops

Finding that participants in Year 1 benefitted greatly from the interpersonal connection that occurred in the Communities of Practice, as well as the topical learning that occurred in workshops, La Piana initiated Learning Communities in Year 2 as a way of marrying those elements. As a result, we decided to provide fewer workshops in Year 2 in favor of providing more Learning Community opportunities. However, **workshops held in Year 2 focused on two critical topics raised in the program – improving staff retention and knowing when to change your organizational strategy.**

Attendance for both workshops was high, with 72 participants joining the October [“Staff Retention Panel”](#) and 59 participants joining the February session on [“How & When to Pivot Your Organizational Strategy.”](#)



Workshops & other program offerings were shared through our monthly newsletter

60%

average newsletter open-rate

Workshop Findings from Program Exit Survey

67%

of respondents learned something new from attending the workshops

89%

of respondents discussed aspects of the workshops with their colleagues

56%

of respondents implemented something new in their organization based on what they learned in a workshop

One-on-One Consulting

>40% of all BUILDing for Growth orgs participated in one-on-one consulting

As part of BUILDing for Growth, we offered multiple opportunities to work more closely with organizations in order to provide them with customized support. These interventions included **access to a pool of one-on-one consulting hours and administration of our Prioritization Tool**, which was developed in Year 1 of BUILDing for Growth to help leadership teams identify and sequence critical tasks according to their level of urgency and value add. Each of the one-on-one engagements allowed organizational leaders to ask questions and delve deeper into specific challenges and opportunities that were explored in the program.

La Piana consultants met one-on-one with 27 organizations for 250+ hours.

Topics covered during one-on-one consulting included:

- Questions and/or critiques from funders
- Organizational structure and management structure issues
- HR challenges (e.g., onboarding)
- Leadership coaching and founder transition planning
- Financial planning and budget processes
- Board development

For organizations that opted to do a facilitated Prioritization Tool session, after a walk through of the Tool and in-depth discussion with organizational leaders, La Piana compiled a summary report of their prioritization activity. **The purpose of the Prioritization Tool and accompanying report was to help organizational leaders make an inventory of pending tasks prioritized according to what had the greatest urgency and value to the organization.** The Prioritization Tool helped organizations make informed decisions on resource allocation to drive growth with clarity.

Examples of One-on-One Engagements

- Managing Partner David La Piana provided one-on-one coaching to an executive director related to her future, managing underperforming staff, and developing a more independent board. The executive director found these sessions very helpful and later contracted directly with La Piana for continued coaching.
- Over the course of 6 hours with an organization's leadership team, Senior Consultants Ali Carella and Christine Chen facilitated discussions on current decision-making processes and organizational structure in order to assess options for change. During the session, the leadership team formulated ideas that would help the organization adapt more effectively to recent changes in leadership and growth, as well as positioning the organization to implement its emerging strategy.

Takeaways & Recommendations

*Over the last two years, we have learned that effectively addressing rapid growth challenges, like changing infrastructure and organizational culture, is time-intensive, complex, and multifaceted. **Rapid growth requires leaders to go through a process of learning about these unique issues and how they manifest, acquiring the tools needed to address the problem, and, finally, employing relevant solutions.** Yet the benefits of this process are often visible only in the medium- to long-term. We hope that – with time and by drawing upon our learning in this program – nonprofits that experience growth can find firm footing and set the course for greater impact.*



5 Takeaways from BUILDing for Growth

1

Rapid growth disproportionately impacts human resources and operations

Throughout BUILDing for Growth, the increased demands on HR and Operations functions were of key importance to participating organizations. In many cases, HR departments had a difficult time keeping up with the needs of a quickly growing organization, including **increases in hiring, DEI&J efforts, supporting cultural connection between new and old staff, accommodating for hybrid work environments, revising or developing more formal policies and procedures, providing ongoing skill-building opportunities, addressing pipelines, and countering burnout.** By the end of the program, burnout/staff retention and change management were two of the top needs expressed by BUILDing for Growth participants.

2

New leaders need a landing pad

It is common for rapidly-growing organizations to promote from within, but less common for nonprofits to provide ongoing support for leadership development, especially for new leaders. This tension was present and surfaced in various ways throughout BUILDing for Growth. For example, the Emerging Leaders Community of Practice had the highest and most consistent level of attendance of any Community of Practice. Additionally, in our program exit survey, respondents uplifted **“skill building for new managers” as the most pressing organizational need.** Many BUILDing for Growth participants talked about their own stories with recent promotions, sharing that although they were spread thin, they felt invigorated by the innovative, “all hands on deck” mentality associated with the pandemic and windfall donations. Yet, **new leaders overwhelmingly felt inadequately supported in skills development, how to prioritize responsibilities, and getting the needed tools to manage successfully.**

Takeaways & Recommendations

3

Nonprofit leaders should not be afraid to talk about succession

In our first year, leaders expressed concern about the "Great Resignation," which left them with numerous vacancies. In our second year, leadership teams, including Executive Director/CEO/President roles, experienced an increase in turnover – a trend that mimics what has been observed more broadly across the nonprofit sector. A number of leadership transitions, in fact, were witnessed over the course of the BUILDing for Growth program. As discussed in the Learning Community section above, **leadership transitions and succession planning were top of mind for a number of participants**. In fact, one of our program's monthly themes on "Cultivating Effective Leadership" was the most popular one among organizational leaders. The development needs of nonprofit leaders indicate that **leadership transition without adequate succession planning has the potential to be greatly disruptive**.

4

Transparency is important, yet hard to implement

The challenge of transparency came up consistently. **While both organizational leaders and staff valued increasing organizational transparency, leaders experienced significant struggles with finding the right balance**. In some cases, staff felt that leaders had not done enough to increase and prioritize transparency, and, in other cases, leaders had overcorrected and experienced significant challenges with delayed decision-making and fractured internal communication efforts. At the end of the program, participants reported that strengthening decision-making processes was still a pressing topic.

5

The recent wave of growth is being replaced with economic uncertainty

There are many indications that the recent wave of revenue growth is leveling off. In our most recent year, concerns about financial sustainability grew. Organizational leaders are concerned about returning to pre-windfall budgets, while **contending with growing inflation and economic instability, as well as cost-of-living increases and the impact of the housing crisis on staff** remaining in the nonprofit sector. The intense level of investment in social justice that characterized the last few years is levelling off or decreasing, and leaders are preparing for potentially precarious economic times. In many cases, nonprofits that experienced growth can now make decisions about reserves and investment policies, but **diversifying funding streams and keeping up with increased service costs is a significant concern**.



Takeaways & Recommendations

Recommendations for Funders

- ● ● **Continue supporting the needs and development of nonprofit leaders.**

The challenges facing nonprofit leaders of rapid-growth organizations are complex and multifaceted. In addition to the pressure of working toward their missions, which have received increased attention and pressure in the national landscape, organizational leaders are also dealing with unique management challenges that require learning and support. Resources, funding, peer exchange, and educational opportunities were all cited as being instrumental for their sustainable growth.

- ● ● **Do not underestimate the impact that growth has had on nonprofits.**

The changes BUILDing for Growth participants have seen will continue to have far-reaching implications for how they work. The diverse needs that become present during periods of rapid growth – including seeking new office space, ensuring cybersecurity, intentional culture development, pressures of hiring and onboarding, and development of new career pathways – offer a glimpse of the new and different pressures placed on organizations.

- ● ● **Continue to uplift opportunities for nonprofits to engage in role-specific peer learning environments.**

A clear and consistent message that we received from participants was the benefit of peer learning. Across the Communities of Practice and Learning Communities, participants felt that sharing with their peers helped them break out of a feeling of isolation and benefit from support, resources, and learnings. They also cited a lack of spaces to promote this kind of exchange. Continuing to connect nonprofit leaders who share similar roles or concerns will strengthen individual nonprofits and fortify a networked approach to nonprofit work.

Dissemination & Knowledge Sharing

In an effort to increase the reach of BUILDing for Growth program findings and resources beyond the participating organizations, La Piana has taken the initiative to make tools, blogs, and stories publicly accessible. We hope this effort will help other organizations facing similar challenges navigate growth and organizational development effectively.

BUILDing for Growth Year 1 Report

The full report of our findings from BUILDing for Growth Year 1 is publicly available on the La Piana website, and these findings informed the development of Year 2.

Chronicle of Philanthropy Article: "How the Ford Foundation Helped Grantees With an Unusual Problem: A Surge of Cash"

This article highlights the BUILDing for Growth program, the value of peer learning, and how specific organizations were able to benefit from the program.

Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) Article: "Riding the Wave of Abundance"

This article by Senior Consultant Humberto Camarena shares insight and practical tips from BUILDing for Growth leaders for other nonprofit leaders that may receive unanticipated, windfall funding.

Downloadable Prioritization Tool and User Guide

La Piana's Prioritization Tool, developed in direct response to program participant needs, is publicly available for download on La Piana's website. The tool includes a guide for how to navigate and utilize the tool, as well as reflection prompts for users.

Prioritization Tool Webinar

Senior Consultants Ali Carella and Humberto Camarena co-facilitated a free webinar that teaches leaders how to use La Piana's Prioritization Tool. The recording is publicly available.

BUILDing for Growth Webpage

La Piana maintained a webpage for program participants that included workshop recordings and resources. After the program's conclusion, the webpage content was deidentified to ensure confidentiality and made publicly available.

"Chrysalis: An Interview with Alternate ROOTS Executive Director, Dr. Michelle Ramos"

Participating org Alternate ROOTS made the unique decision to take a "chrysalis period," which generated curiosity across the program cohort. Dr. Michelle Ramos, Executive Director of Alternate ROOTS, shared their story and experience leading up to the chrysalis period.

"5 Common Mistakes Nonprofits Make with Data & How to Avoid Them"

Based on a popular data workshop offered in Year 1, Senior Consultant Ali Carella wrote a La Piana blog that explains how nonprofits can deliver effective and equitable data-driven results.

"Navigating Succession Planning"

Succession came up so frequently in the program that it was the focus of a Learning Community, so Senior Consultant Christine Chen wrote a La Piana blog on takeaways from the Learning Community and recommendations for how to navigate leadership transitions.

"7 Tips to Address Staff Burnout & Retention"

During our Year 2 program launch event, participants had breakout discussions on how their organizations were responding to burnout and retention. We compiled these ideas in a La Piana blog.

"Creating Policy in a Changing Organization: Five Takeaways"

For this La Piana blog and interview, we spoke with Autumn Valdez, Business Director at BlackStar and a BUILDing for Growth participant, who generously shared her experience with effectively implementing new policies in her growing organization.



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*We help social sector organizations
navigate change, so they can be more
effective at delivering on their mission.*

La Piana
CONSULTING