Advancing Empathy Initiative Evaluation

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WOODLAND PARK ZOO

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Executive Summary

The Advancing Empathy Initiative

Woodland Park Zoo's (WPZ) Advancing Empathy (AE) Initiative aims to empower zoos and aquariums to deepen their commitment and capacity to foster empathy for wildlife, with the goal of promoting conservation action. The AE Initiative utilizes a two-pronged approach: (1) funding capacity-building grants in Partner Organizations within a seven-state region including Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin (Building Organizational Capacity to Foster Empathy for Wildlife Granting Program or the Grant Program), while (2) building a member-driven, participatory learning network (The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife) Network or the Network).

Our Evaluation Plan

The evaluation explored key questions about the effectiveness of the ACE for Wildlife Network in achieving goals related to capacity-building, collective impact, and sustainability, as well as the impact of the Grant Program on the growth of sustainable empathy programming. This evaluation also aimed to assess the effectiveness of the initiative's two-pronged approach in building capacity for empathy work and the effectiveness of WPZ in their multifaceted role. To address these evaluation questions, several methods were used including six Rapid Inquiry Cycles (RIC), an evaluation survey at two separate times, one year apart (2022 and 2023), interviews, and case studies.

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Evaluation Findings

The ACE for Wildlife Network

> **?** How successful is the **ACE for Wildlife Network** at achieving its goals around capacity-building, collective impact, and sustainability?

The ACE for Wildlife Network serves 369 Members and Affiliates (as of October 2023). The inaugural organizations are 20 zoos and aquariums accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) from the seven-state region. These organizations are referred to as Network *Partner Organizations*. These Partner Organizations have voting rights and are eligible to receive travel support for two staff members to attend in-person Network Summits to receive continuing education and network opportunities. The Network offers participation for individuals as *Members*, who are employed by a Network Partner Organization, or *Affiliates*, who work at an organization outside of the Network or volunteer at a Network Partner

Organization. The Network hosts 10-15 events per year (including an annual Empathy Summit), supports monthly committee meetings, creates a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of Partner Organizations and Affiliates, and moderates a discussion board and a curated list of resources accessible through the Network website. Both Members and Affiliates can access Network resources, attend Network events, and contribute to the Network through committee participation, presentations at events, and resource submissions to the shared library.
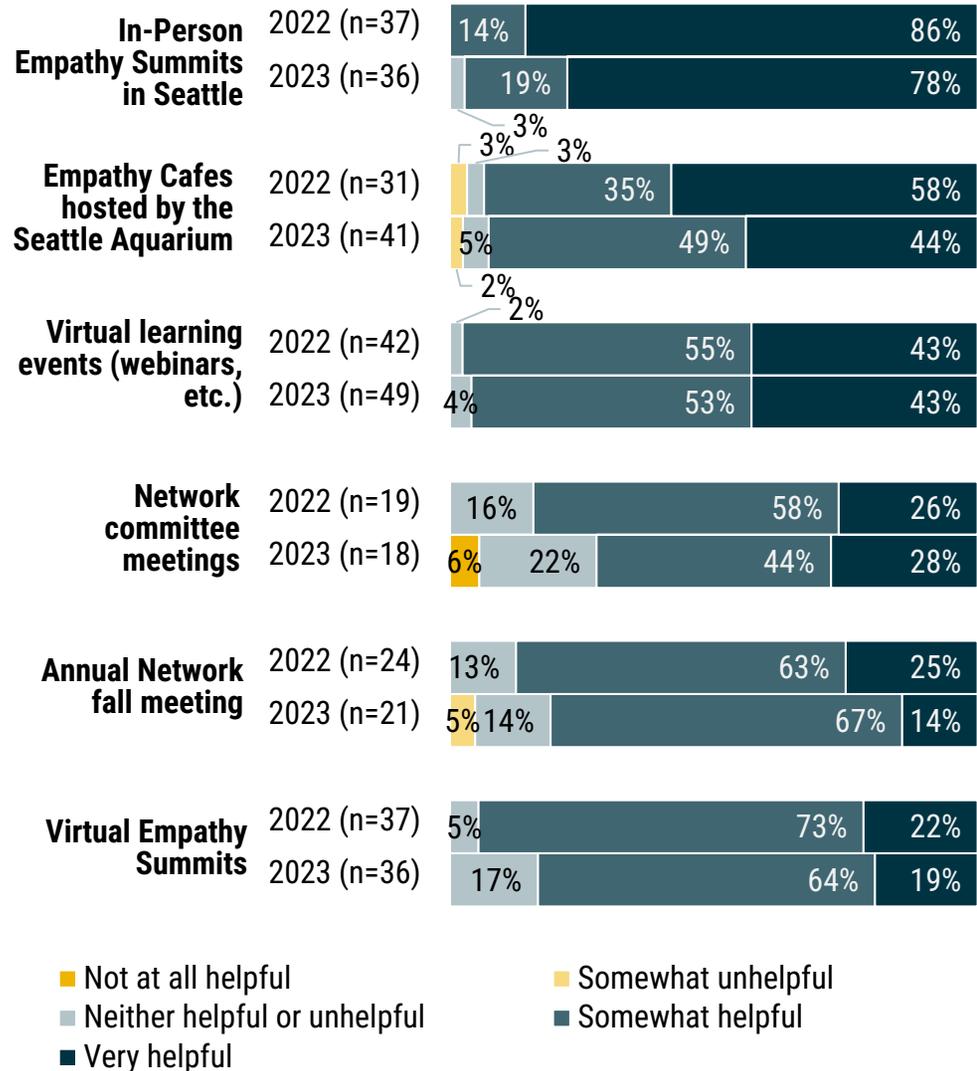
🔑 Key Findings

The findings and evidence are derived from the evaluation survey (2022 and 2023), RIC 1, 2, and 3, and case studies.

Network Activity Benefits

Evidence collected through this evaluation indicated that the Network is successfully meeting its goals of providing benefits to Members and Affiliates and in building organizational capacity. The majority of survey respondents[i] believed Network activities to be moderately or highly effective in supporting their organizations to grow capacity in empathy work (see Figure ES1). The most effective activities were the in-person Empathy Summits in Seattle, followed by the Empathy Cafes hosted by the Seattle Aquarium[ii], and virtual learning events held by the Network.

FIGURE ES1: Network Activities Benefitting Organizational Growth

In-Person Empathy Summits in Seattle
- 2022 (n=37): 14% | 86%
- 2023 (n=36): 19% | 78%

Empathy Cafes hosted by the Seattle Aquarium
- 2022 (n=31): 3% 3% 3% | 35% | 58%
- 2023 (n=41): 5% | 49% | 44%

Virtual learning events (webinars, etc.)
- 2022 (n=42): 2% 2% | 55% | 43%
- 2023 (n=49): 4% | 53% | 43%

Network committee meetings
- 2022 (n=19): 16% | 58% | 26%
- 2023 (n=18): 6% 22% | 44% | 28%

Annual Network fall meeting
- 2022 (n=24): 13% | 63% | 25%
- 2023 (n=21): 5% 14% | 67% | 14%

Virtual Empathy Summits
- 2022 (n=37): 5% | 73% | 22%
- 2023 (n=36): 17% | 64% | 19%

Legend:
- ■ Not at all helpful
- ■ Somewhat unhelpful
- ■ Neither helpful or unhelpful
- ■ Somewhat helpful
- ■ Very helpful

Member Personal Benefits

Survey respondents also reported a very high level of personal benefit regarding their involvement in the Network (Figure ES2). In 2023, over 90% of respondents felt they had gained new skills or ideas related to empathy work and felt motivated to continue their own learning and foster collaboration with others. As Figures ES1 and ES2 (shown on the next page) show, these positive results were consistent in both 2022 and 2023.

Organizational Capacity

Respondents were asked to report their perception of their organization's capacity to engage in empathy work and with the Network. It was clear that empathy was a high priority at most organizations and among leadership. Organizational factors that support the Network included:

- High leadership and staff buy-in;
- Multiple internal champions;
- Accessible internal empathy trainings in a variety of formats;
- Participation at in-person Empathy Summits; and
- Organizational alignment with empathy (i.e., connected to a mission or a core value).

Just over half of survey respondents (58%) believed it was clear why everyone *ought* to participate in the Network, and a similar number (52%) believed it was clear *how* everyone can participate. However, there were varied perspectives on how and why to participate in the Network and their organizational capacity to do so. Only 57% of respondents could identify a cross-departmental team dedicated to implementing empathy practices, and 52% could identify a strategic document guiding their internal empathy work, both critical elements in sustaining empathy-related work at Partner Organizations Both survey respondents and members of focus groups proposed various improvements, such as streamlining Network communication and developing guides, to more effectively encourage and sustain participation. The case studies highlight how organizations vary in their empathy
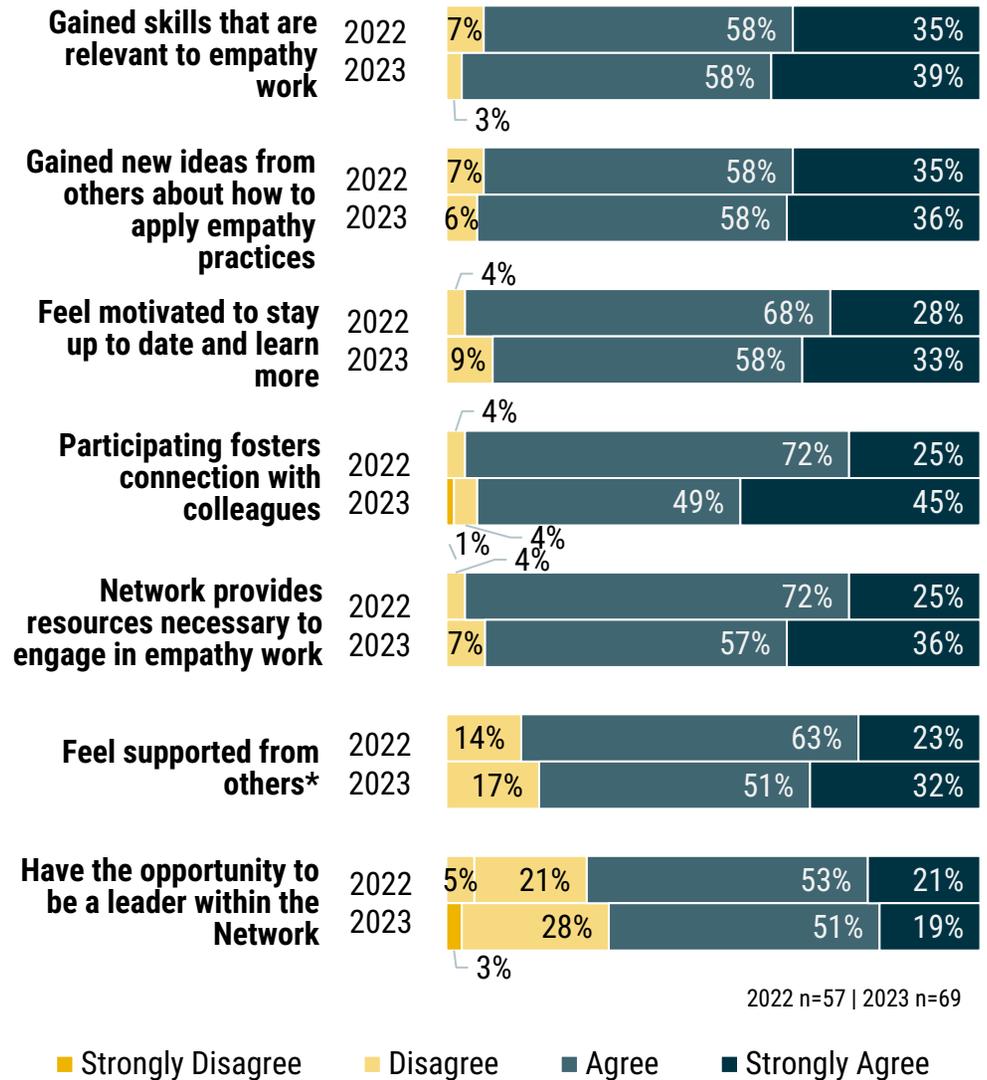
implementation efforts. For example, one site saw empathy as deeply connected to its mission, and the second site saw it as a core value.

The primary challenges individuals reported as barriers to participation in the Network continued to be time and personal capacity. There have also been challenges for some roles (i.e., animal care staff) to find the Network material accessible and relevant. In response, Network Members and Affiliates made recommendations to streamline and target resources to particular departments. Overall, the evaluation findings point to several Network features critical for sustainability including:

♦ Transparent, approachable, and collaborative leadership;
♦ Easily accessible resources;
♦ Streamlined and targeted communications; and
♦ In-person Empathy Summits

Collective Impact

FIGURE ES2: Individual Member Benefits

Gained skills that are relevant to empathy work
2022: 7% | 58% | 35%
2023: 3% | 58% | 39%

Gained new ideas from others about how to apply empathy practices
2022: 7% | 58% | 35%
2023: 6% | 58% | 36%

Feel motivated to stay up to date and learn more
2022: 4% | 68% | 28%
2023: 9% | 58% | 33%

Participating fosters connection with colleagues
2022: 4% | 72% | 25%
2023: 1% 4% | 49% | 45%

Network provides resources necessary to engage in empathy work
2022: 4% | 72% | 25%
2023: 7% | 57% | 36%

Feel supported from others*
2022: 14% | 63% | 23%
2023: 17% | 51% | 32%

Have the opportunity to be a leader within the Network
2022: 5% | 21% | 53% | 21%
2023: 3% | 28% | 51% | 19%

2022 n=57 | 2023 n=69

■ Strongly Disagree   ■ Disagree   ■ Agree   ■ Strongly Agree

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The evaluation also found evidence that the
Network is beginning to inspire new collaborative
relationships and partnerships within and outside
of the Network. More than 95% of survey
respondents saw how participating in the Network
fostered connection with colleagues. The case
studies illustrated how organizations are
developing new partnerships within the Network
and building empathy-focused communities of
practice within their own geographic regions.
However, at this time, there is not clear evidence of
collective impact[iii] yet emerging.

Building Organizational Capacity to Foster Empathy for Wildlife Granting Program

> **?** What impact is the **Grant Program** having on growing sustainable empathy programming?

In 2020, WPZ initiated a pilot grant opportunity which awarded seven grants to Network Partner Organizations. The Building Organizational Capacity to Foster Empathy for Wildlife Granting Program (the Grant Program) launched in 2021 with the goal of building the capacity of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in a seven-state region to engage in empathy-based work at their organizations.

Currently, these grants aim to support organizations by providing essential resources, skill, expertise, and partnerships needed to implement effective empathy-related programs. The Grant Program offers two tiers of grants: Tier 1 grants span up to two years and $250,000 and Tier 2 grants cover up to one year and $50,000.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Grant Program funded 36 unique projects across three rounds of funding totaling $3,590,045. Awards were made for projects that contribute to building capacity, skills, resources, expertise, and partnerships.

🔑 Key Findings

The findings and evidence are derived from the evaluation survey (2022 and 2023), RIC 4, and case studies.

Organizational Capacity

Grantees believed the Grant Program has been extremely supportive of their own capacity building efforts. In fact, over 90% of respondents believed the funding increased their capacity to develop empathy-related work and helped staff

increase their knowledge (see Figure ES3). Also, some grantee organizations have experienced significant programmatic and cultural changes as a result of grant funding. Grantees used grant dollars to fund activities and projects such as ambassador animals or husbandry; culturally responsive programming; exhibits, interpretation, onsite programming; infrastructure, organizational-wide frameworks, staffing; school, youth programming; and volunteer programs.

Grant Program Structure and Management

Grantees also reported a high degree of satisfaction with features of the grant process and team, noting a hands-on, flexible approach and an approachable grant management team. However, the hands-on approach, combined with Network activities and evaluation activities, did give some grantees a sense that the grant management was higher maintenance than typical for other grants. These grantees felt like the amount of contact from the AE grant management staff, along with

communication and requests associated with the Network, and the multiple evaluation efforts led to confusion and some additional burden. Other grantees did not express this sentiment, but instead remarked on the ease of the process and experience. Grantees made suggestions in RIC 4 on improving the grant process including reduced check-ins and streamlined communication to

FIGURE ES3: Grant Impact on Capacity

2022 n=33 | 2023 n=38

■ Strongly Disagree　■ Disagree　■ Agree　■ Strongly Agree
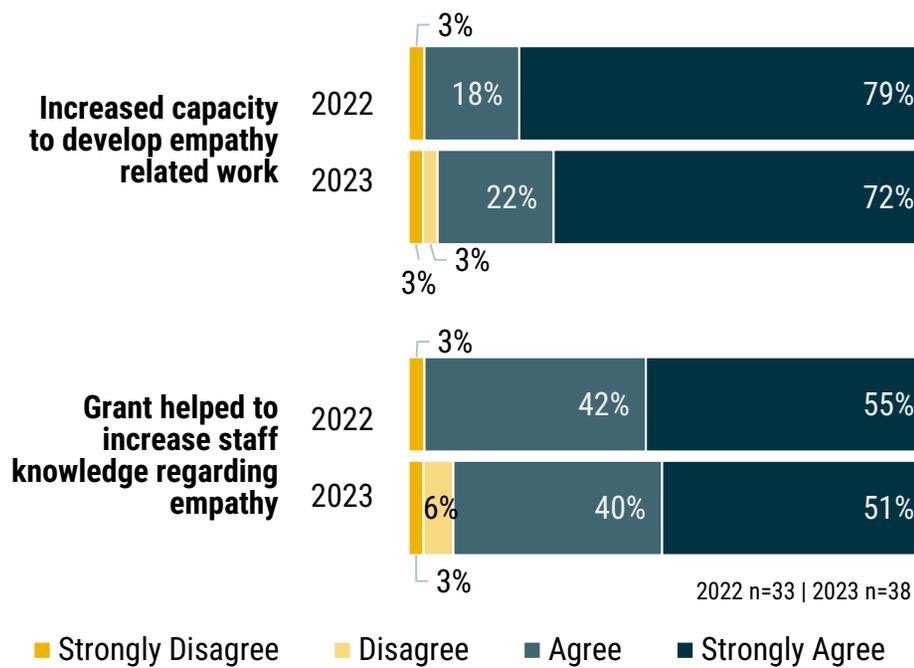
mitigate overwhelming grantees and Partner Organizations with excessive meeting requests.

ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

Overall, the greatest barriers to grant implementation were internal or personal factors outside the control of the AE Initiative. Time was the most significant barrier, followed by capacity, staffing, and internal buy-in. Supportive features for grant implementation were internal leadership support and project planning, followed by well-defined roles and flexibility on granting requirements.

Advancing Empathy Initiative's Two-Pronged Approach

> To what extent is the **two-pronged approach** - the ACE for Wildlife Network combined with the Grant Program- successful at advancing zoos and aquariums' capacity to foster empathy for animals?

The AE Initiative employs a two-pronged approach including both the ACE for Wildlife Network and the Grant Program. The evaluation sought to understand how the Network and Grant Program interact and how they may mutually reinforce each other, whether these approaches are effective in supporting Partner Organizations to build organizational capacity, and if these programs together support Partner Organizations in fostering cultural shifts by embedding empathy in the organizational culture.

🔑 Key Findings

The findings and evidence are derived from the evaluation survey (primarily 2022) and case studies. Affiliates were not asked to provide insight on the two-pronged approach, given their ineligibility for the Grant Program.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO-APPROACHES

Findings from the 2022 Evaluation Survey revealed varying perceptions of the relationship between the Grant Program and the Network. The largest group of survey respondents (43%) recognized the Grant Program and the Network as supports for one another, suggesting that the two-pronged approach was effectively working together and reinforcing goals. Empathy Summits (a Network activity) and AE Initiative site visits (Network and Grant Program activities) proved to be critical components of the Grant Program and Network that deepened organizational capacity and were a catalyst to culture change.

However, 31% of respondents did not understand the differences between the two prongs, or were unclear about the connection, pointing to the potential need for future clarification. Throughout the evaluation, respondents mentioned the Network and Grant Program activities interchangeably, leading to some lack of clarity on whether the distinction of the two-pronged approach was clear to all respondents. Aspects of both approaches were cited as pivotal components of their own capacity building by case study organizations. Their stories of building knowledge and drive at Network activities and sustaining that through grant activities and the AE Initiative site visit showed some evidence of effectiveness of the interchange between the two approaches.

WPZ's Role in the Advancing Empathy Initiative

> **?** Is **Woodland Park Zoo** effective in its multifaceted role as a facilitator of the ACE for Wildlife Network, an active participant in the Network, and the manager of the Grant Program?

WPZ plays a unique role as a funder, Network facilitator, and Network Partner Organization. The Network and Grant Program are staffed by WPZ's AE staff. Having AE staff as the backbone support of the Network, while also managing the Grant Program, has led to an intentional effort to increase transparency in the process and lessen the potential grantor-grantee power dynamic as much as possible. While the AE staff have designated job duties with a clear separation of responsibilities according to the two prongs, the AE staff had a desire to understand the perception of WPZ across participants of the Network and Grant Program.

🔑 Key Findings

The findings and evidence are derived from the evaluation survey (2022 and 2023) and RIC 5.

WPZ's Support

There was a high degree of satisfaction from survey participants regarding their interaction with and support from WPZ's AE staff. Responses indicated a high level of trust with AE staff: 100% of respondents saw WPZ's AE staff as willing to walk through ideas, 97% felt supported by WPZ's AE staff to engage in empathy work, and 94% agreed that the Network structure was actively building shared leadership. This positive feedback and high level of trust among participants highlight WPZ's AE staff's ability to provide a strong foundation for continued collaboration.

WPZ's Effectiveness

Participants also positively acknowledged WPZ's ability to balance their multiple roles. A majority (95%) of respondents believed that AE staff was good, excellent, or outstanding in their ability to balance their role as both funder and Network collaborator. The same percentage believed they can turn to WPZ for guidance. Most (92%) respondents felt comfortable working alongside AE staff within the Network, but it remains unclear whether all Network Members and grantees shared the same goals as the AE Initiative. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of AE staff in managing their roles and suggest an opportunity to explore the extent of alignment in shared goals for the future.

Conclusions

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the AE Initiative has been successful in building an active learning network and a responsive Grant Program. Together, the approaches are proving to be beneficial among the Network and grantees and have been effective in reinforcing each other's goals. The AE Initiative is thoughtfully creating spaces and opportunities for organizations to increase their capacity, improve overall culture, and provide additional opportunities for empathy work.

Many of the challenges noted throughout this evaluation are complex and multifaceted, such as how busy staff engage in a voluntary network; how communications can be structured to be easily digestible, comprehensive, and clear; how messaging and framing can be relevant to an organization versus tailored to specific departments or roles; and how grants can be managed to ensure both accountability and efficiency. In the following section we propose recommendations and opportunities for clarity and growth to address these challenges.

RAPID INQUIRY CYCLES

Throughout 2022 and 2023, the Catalyze team shared findings and topical recommendations with the AE staff to drive immediate learning and timely improvements. Recommendations provided mid-project are not shared in the Executive Summary but are available in greater detail in the report. The six RIC topics were:

1. Ease and effectiveness of Network communications
2. Perceptions of empathy and the Network among animal care staff
3. Diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion suggestions from Network Members
4. Perspectives on the grant process within the Grant Program
5. Perceptions of the AE Initiative among WPZ leadership
6. Development of a self-assessment rubric to measure empathy practices at an organizational level

Recommendations

1 **Continue activities that deliver high Member benefit:**

Members identified in-person Empathy Summits and site visits to Network Partner Organizations as highly influential "pivotal moments". These events significantly built momentum for organizational change occurring within Partner Organizations.

2 **Clarify how and why everyone can participate in the Network:**

The ACE for Wildlife Network was strongly aligned with education departments within Partner Organizations. In expanding its participation beyond education departments, the Network can deepen its saturation within Partner Organizations. Consider using audience identification and segmentation strategies to clarify how and why animal care staff, customer service staff, custodial staff, and other staff can learn about empathy for wildlife and build their skills or practice. Develop advisory groups or use paid "content experts" that match strategy and tactics to your target audience. Identify trusted, well-known messengers to be spokespeople to their group. Streamline existing resources and build brief, focused new resources, using targeted messaging on mobile or pocket-sized printouts. Consider using agile/design-thinking methodology and setting metrics to measure saturation.

3 **Focus on sustaining work within Partner Organizations:**

To create lasting change, Partner Organizations need to build empathy practices into their infrastructure (developing training programs; embedding empathy into strategic, guiding documents; developing internal multiple champions; etc.). While the focus of this evaluation plan was primarily the effectiveness of the Network and Grant Program, as both the Network and Grant Program mature, the AE

Initiative may want to focus efforts on supporting and measuring the growth of empathy practices at Partner Organizations and then use those findings to adjust Network offerings.

4 **Define collective impact:**
If collective impact remains a focus of the Network in the future, collaborate with stakeholders to clarify collective goals, and align and recruit cross sector partners. A collective impact plan starts with clear system indicators that all partners work towards changing. Build a budget and resources to sustain this work. Future evaluation in this area is suggested.

5 **Grow leadership within the Network:**
Over time, Network leadership will change as individuals change focus or transition jobs. The AE staff will need to ensure the Network has sustainable pathways into leadership for individuals to ensure succession planning for committee positions. Investigate why 31% of

survey respondents do not feel they have opportunities for leadership to explore hidden barriers.

6 **Explore Affiliate perspectives:**
The number of Affiliates is growing fast, and in the near future, the number of Network Affiliates may soon be similar to the number of Network Members. Many of the activities conducted over the past two years through this evaluation were focused primarily on Network Members. As the Network grows, geographic coverage, and participant type, the findings from this evaluation may become less applicable. Future evaluation in this area is warranted. During this evaluation period, most grantees Catalyze interfaced with were active grantees. As the Grant Program matures, the AE Initiative has the opportunity to explore how former grantees sustain their empathy work after their funding ended.

Suggestions for Continued Learning

Strengthen the Community of Practice aspect of the Network:

There is clear evidence that the Network has an active committee leadership structure, and Members and Affiliates feel a sense of belonging and support for growing their empathy practices. Some (but not all) collaborative networks become Communities of Practice (CoP). The purpose of learning networks is primarily information sharing and networking, while communities of practice focus on knowledge creation and performance improvement. The extent to which the Network is a CoP was not an evaluation question. Catalyze believes further learning on CoPs and measurement/inquiry in this area can continue to support the Network as it grows.

Consider using Principles-Focused Evaluation

Principles-Focused Evaluation is an evaluation methodology that could be an excellent fit for future evaluations. Shifting towards a principles-focused evaluation approach has many benefits. In a principles-focused approach, principles of a project or a movement are collaboratively agreed upon, and then specific instruments are developed to measure the implementation of that principle. This evaluation approach can be applied narrowly, like looking at the Grant Program's operations, or widely, across all organizations participating in the Network or Grant Program

Institute a Coaching for Leadership model:

Pair the current approach with a coaching approach for leadership development, recognizing that people's needs and circumstances vary widely. Coaching helps individuals and organizations build self-awareness and accountability, fostering the inner motivation required to reach their unique goals. This approach shifts the responsibility for empathy development to the respective organizations, promoting sustainability.