Crave of Central Florida: A Leadership Development Program for the "Spiritually Curious"

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Overview

Healthy cities rely on community programs to support the needs of their residents. However, the organizations that provide these programs do not exist in a vacuum, but rather as part of a greater ecosystem that includes the nonprofits themselves, the community members they serve, civic leaders and financial philanthropists. Therefore, the challenge of developing and sustaining a healthy social innovation ecosystem is an important aspect of community development.

This study assesses the impact of Crave of Central Florida (Crave) on its participants, key volunteers, and leadership. Crave supports members of the Orlando-area community that are engaged in or considering social innovation work. Participants in each annual cohort go through a program emphasizing three areas:

- Spiritual formation discussions conducted in a small group setting with an ecumenical perspective.
- Professional development workshops on subjects like professional communications and budgeting.
- Networking opportunities with local leaders and other entrepreneurs.

Crave's emphasis on the spiritual and emotional role of social innovation distinguishes it from other nonprofit leadership development programs in Central Florida.

The data for our study comes from a community-based, participatory impact evaluation method called Ripple Effect Mapping (REM), which captures a community's shared impression of the broad impacts of a program — the "ripples" that represent system-wide impacts beyond the initial focus of a program or

intervention. The key output of an REM session is a collaborative mind map created by community stakeholders that summarizes their collective view of the program's impacts and benefits. We conducted two REM sessions, one with Crave's leadership and advisory council and a second with recent program participants. The results of our assessment are based on a thematic analysis of the collaborative mind maps, group discussion, and other artifacts of the mapping process.

Five key findings emerge from our results.

- 1. Everything that happens in Crave revolves around participants' perception that it is *inclusive* and *non-judgmental*. Crave supports an environment of *psychological safety*, where participants can express vulnerability, questions, and doubts without fear of negative consequences from the group (Edmondson, 1999). All of the other positive impacts of Crave are built upon this foundation of mutual acceptance and trust.
- 2. Crave functions as an *open and egalitarian learning community*. Because the program is inclusive, participants feel empowered to admit lack of knowledge without fear of criticism, then mutually construct a curriculum in response to the group's needs. This process demands that the program leaders see the participants as co-creators of the experience and not only as passive recipients of the program.
- 3. The majority of members in our REM sessions were *generally ambivalent* about organized religion. Although most Crave participants have either active involvement or previous experience with traditional religion (most commonly in a mainline Protestant denomination), discussion about faith emphasized the need to find spiritual communities that were both more inclusive and directly active in the community, with a belief that Crave fills a spiritual need that is currently unmet by participants' other religious affiliations.
- 4. Crave participants frequently see themselves as lacking resources, including money and access to beneficial professional networks. Therefore, they value professional acknowledgment and seek to grow and demonstrate their own competence. Participants value collaborative and inclusive leadership, which occurs when Crave's leaders listen to the group and adjust the program in response to their needs.
- 5. Crave members *negotiate questions of identity* and engage in cross-group dialogue. These questions include differences in religious background, identity, and race. In particular, Black participants spoke about their freedom to be open and engaged in honest discussion with the group and with some external visitors, but also expressed a need and willingness to "push back" against visitors that they perceived as patronizing or out-of-touch.

These insights have implications for Crave's strategic planning and future programming.

- Crave should maintain an emphasis on inclusion and psychological safety in group interactions, even as the diversity of program participants increases.
- Directly acknowledge the value of participants' voices and given them a role in designing the program's curriculum.
- Maintain a focus on spiritual development, but with an open and individualized focus. Emphasize positive impact in the community as an expression of lived faith.
- Support training for leaders to help them model inclusive, collaborative leadership.
- Acknowledge that participants seek personal and professional growth, but within a decentralized, peer-to-peer framework. Crave members want access to information that enables their own self-directed learning, not a prepackaged vision of success.

Ripple Effect Mapping

Ripple Effect Mapping is a method of program evaluation which engages stakeholders to reflect and collaboratively map a program's history and impact. REM was originally developed in agricultural extension work to investigate the impacts of interventions on entire communities, particularly second-order qualitative effects that could not be easily captured through direct quantitative measures (Kollock et al., 2012). REM is simple, inexpensive, and capable of capturing complex interactions across distance and time. An REM session is also frequently motivating for the participants, and can be an effective way to reaffirm the values of a program or as a capstone marking the end of an implementation period.

An REM session is organized like an extended think-pair-share discussion activity and typically takes two to three hours to complete. In addition to the participants, who represent stakeholders in the program being assessed, there is at least one primary facilitator who manages the event and discussions, and one or two co-facilitators who assist with the group mind mapping portion of the session.

The session proceeds as follows:

- 1. The facilitator welcomes the participants, gives an overview of the process, and answers any initial questions. The research process and any uses of the data generated by the session are also discussed at this time; participants are asked to complete consent forms authorizing their participation before the session continues.
- 2. Participants consider and free-write individual responses to a short prompt. This first activity is intentionally open and is intended to stimulate reflection.

- There is no required format for the responses and participants can write as much or as little as they wish. (10-15 minutes).
- 3. Participants group into pairs and engage each other in structured interviews, using question guides provided by the facilitators. The interview questions emphasize collecting specific stories related to the program (often phrased as *Tell me about a time when...*) and an appreciative approach to inquiry, where the focus is on the successes and positive elements of the program (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011). (20-30 minutes).
- 4. The largest part of the session is the full-group collaborative mind mapping activity, which engages all participants and provides an opportunity to make connections between different program impacts. The facilitator prompts the participants to share the thoughts and experiences that emerged during their reflections and interviews. The discussion can be structured, perhaps working through the interview questions one a time, or free. The facilitator helps manage the flow of topics and asks follow-up questions when appropriate. As themes emerge from the discussion, the co-facilitators draw out a mind map on a large piece of paper taped to the wall at the front of the room. This portion of the event can also be recorded and supplemented with the facilitators' notes. (50-75 minutes).
- 5. The session ends with closing statements and a short discussion regarding how the findings of the study may be obtained by participants.

The final outputs of the session include the written individual reflections and pair interview responses, the collaborative mind map produced by the full group, the audio recording of the complete discussion, and the facilitators' notes and observations. These artifacts can then be used as the starting point for further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

The Impact Lab team conducted two REM sessions with Crave stakeholders. The first, in August 2021, with nine members of the advisory board, a group of engaged program alumni who consult with Crave's top-level leadership on the direction of the program. The second session in November 2021 included eleven Crave graduates who had completed the program within the past five years (four participants in this second session were also present for the first session).

Results and Key Themes

Collaborative Mind Maps

Figures 1 and 2 show the collaborative mind maps produced during the two REM sessions with the advisory council (Figure 1) and program graduates (Figure 2). Both maps were transcribed into electronic form using the Miro software package.

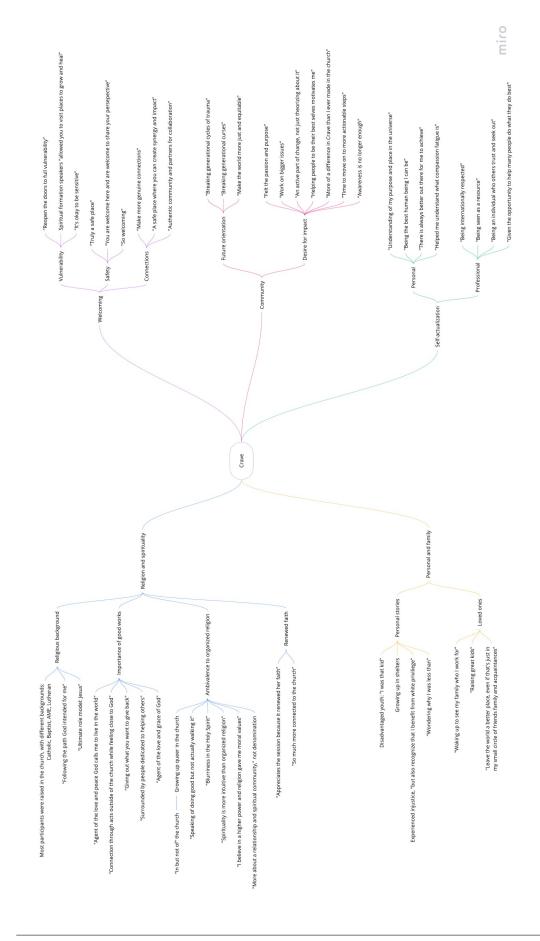


Figure 1: Collaborative ripple effect mind map produced by members of the Crave advisory board.

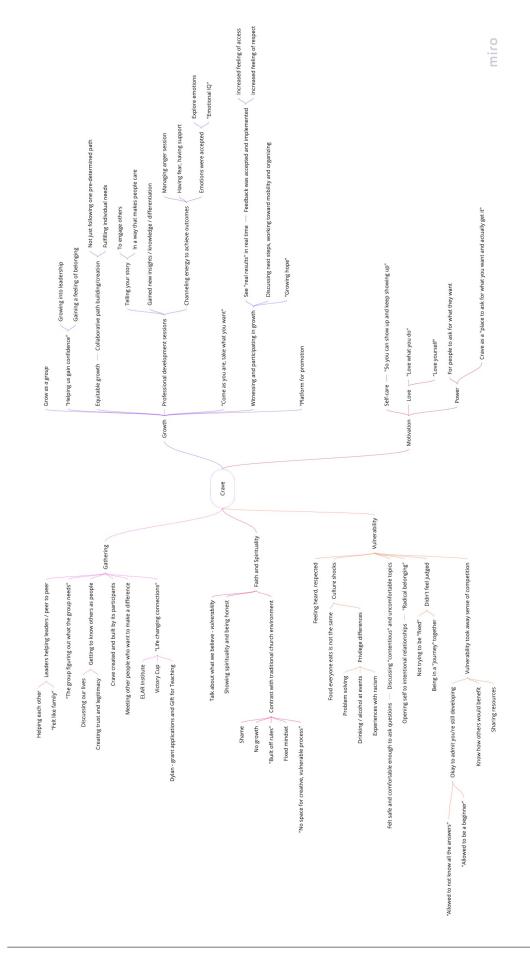


Figure 2: Collaborative ripple effect mind map produced by Crave graduates.

The rest of this section focuses on four key themes that emerged in the mind maps, group discussion, and written responses:

- The perception that Crave is a welcoming and inclusive environment where participants can have difficult discussions and take risks.
- The role of peer-to-peer learning in Crave as a driver of personal growth, which is enabled by the inclusive environment.
- Participants' orientation toward a spiritual worldview that emphasizes actively doing good, but with some degree of dissatisfaction with traditional religious groups.
- Distributed power sharing between Crave's leaders and the group, which
 is closely connected to participants' desire for competence and selfactualization.

Inclusion, Safety, and Vulnerability

Participants repeatedly emphasized their belief that Crave is a safe and inclusive space where they feel encouraged and free to take risks. Participants described Crave as "a safe place" that offers "authentic community" and collaboration. Graduate #6 said that he "never felt judged" by the group, but felt "respected". Graduate #9 said, "I love my group", who are "like sisters and brothers". Participants appreciated that Crave did not attempt to impose a particular vision of success or outcome. Graduate #10 noted that the goal of the program is not "fixing or changing" anyone. Graduate #2 noted that it was possible for people to "come as [they] are".

Because participants perceive the group as a place of psychological safety, they are therefore empowered to take risks without fear of judgment. Multiple participants noted the importance of vulnerability in their meetings and how it empowered the group to have meaningful discussions about potentially contentious topics:

- "We don't shy away from difficult questions".
- "Like a good therapy session".
- "Get to the real".
- "Felt comfortable speaking about spirituality".
- "Talk about what we believe".

Topics of spirituality, belief, and race were highlighted as topics that benefited from a willingness to express vulnerability.

Learning and Growth

Peer-to-peer learning

Crave functions as a non-hierarchical peer-to-peer learning community. Group members informally share information and teach other and also negotiate with leaders to determine the content and direction of the program.

Participants appreciated the open nature of Crave's programming. Graduate #7 stated that the ethos of Crave is to "come as you are but also take what you want". Multiple participants used language relating to shared journeys or growth when describing their learning experience:

- "Let's live and learn from each other and grow."
- "Just trying to learn and get better and do good."
- "You're allowed to be a beginner; you're allowed to not know and not have it all figured out."
- "Let go of the outcomes or specifics and just know that there is a journey."
- Crave was "created and built by participants".
- "We created the path."

Participants also felt that this open approach was preferable to other professional development programs, which were seen as more hierarchical. Graduate #4 described other nonprofit professional development workshops as having a top-down "A + B = C" approach that allowed no place for growth. Graduate #7 described feeling like a "lab rat"—a subject of experimentation or exotic fascination—during other professional development programs. Graduate #10 felt that other professional programs required their participants to "have it all locked in", whereas at Crave she was "allowed to be a beginner".

The connection between vulnerability and learning

Participants' learning experiences were closely connected to the inclusive environment described in the previous section. Cultivating an ethos of vulnerability allowed participants to feel comfortable admitting their own lack of expertise. Graduate #10 noted that she "felt safe enough" to ask questions about professional topics. Graduate #4 noted that, "Vulnerability took away competition". Graduate #7, a Black man, specifically stated that he did not have to "code switch" or "present" during interactions with his group.

The basic growth-promoting behavior of Crave, therefore, runs on a cycle that is built around a ethos of inclusion and peer-to-peer learning:

 Participants gather and establish inclusive relationships through food and discussion.

- These relationships create a shared group norm of psychological safety, where the group is seen as a safe place for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999).
- Because of a perception of safety, participants are free to acknowledge their own doubts, lack of expertise, and desire for growth.
- Group members generate peer-to-peer learning ideas to address each other's concerns. Because of the inclusive environment, this learning process is not perceived as competitive or hierarchical—no group members are elevated as "experts" above the others.
- The resulting growth and transformation reinforces group norms about inclusion, safety, and openness, continuing the cycle.

Graduate #2 eloquently described this process: "When we know how to meet people's needs, we can bridge the gap. When you see and share the vulnerability you can help each other grow."

Faith and Religion

Dissatisfaction with organized religion

Overall, Crave participants expressed a generally spiritual worldview, but a critical view of traditional organized religion. Discussion of religion clustered around three themes:

- Traditional religion operates from a fixed mindset and does not encourage personal growth.
- Traditional religion is not focused enough on positive works within the community.
- Many churches are not inclusive of those who identify as LGBTQ+ or belong to other underrepresented groups.

Even while making these criticisms, some participants stated that Crave had supported their faith and brought them into a closer relationship with God or an organized church.

Graduate #7, who was raised in a historically Black Protestant denomination, expressed a belief that traditional religious groups are hypocritical, saying, "Church feels fake to me, it's built off of rules but the rules changed" and, "It's built off of what's best for people's pockets, not what's best for people."

Graduate #4, who identifies as LGBTQ+, described his experience in traditional churches as one of "shame" that allowed for "zero growth". Graduate #11, also LGBTQ+, described growing up "in but not of" the church and being driven away from organized religion by "people speaking of doing good but not actually walking it". After participating in Crave, he felt "so much more connected to

church", with an "understanding of my purpose and place in the universe", and a "connection to folks that really walk the walk".

Graduate #3, a member of the Crave leadership team also involved in ministry work, expressed a belief that Crave allows her to "see real results in real time", which she described as a rare experience in traditional ministry work. She further expressed a belief that Crave succeeds because its participants are "trying not to do harm", which she perceived as a difference from social work carried out by traditional religious organizations.

Spiritual worldview and the importance of good works

Despite criticisms of organized religion or existing churches, Crave participants also expressed positive orientation toward the broader role of faith in their lives. This was usually framed as a general orientation towards spirituality or a desire to perform good works in the world as a fulfillment of a divine mission. For example, in response to the interview question, "Tell me about your experiences with religion and spirituality", participants' answers included:

- "I'm following the path God intended for me."
- "Ultimate role model: Jesus".
- "Connection through acts outside of church while feeling close to God".
- "Agent of the love and peace God calls me to live in the world".
- "Giving out what you want to give back".
- "More about relationship and spiritual community".
- "I believe in a higher power and religion gave me moral values."
- "[Being] an active part of change, not just theorizing about it".

Outsider mentality

As a group, Crave participants respect the social value of religion and see it as a positive element of their own lives, but also see themselves as outsiders to organized religious groups. They desire to do good works that have an immediate positive impact on their communities, but feel that their churches are complacent and slow-moving. Further, they feel isolated from the mainstream of their faith communities due to sexual orientation, identity, questions about core beliefs, or a desire for a more personal spirituality that isn't encouraged by the community.

Shared perception of outsider status serves as a powerful bonding force within each Crave group. Challenging topics like theology, morality, and race can be acknowledged and discussed safely because disagreements over those issues do not threaten the group's shared sense of identity.

Sharing Power

Crave participants desire opportunities to demonstrate professional competence and be accepted as leaders. Graduate #2 described Crave as giving participants "the confidence to be the experts we are" and providing "a platform for promotion". Others described a vision of professional success that includes being seen as valuable respected:

- "Being internationally respected".
- "Being seen as a resource".
- "Being an individual others trust and seek out".

The peer-to-peer learning environment builds confidence by acknowledging members' expertise and leadership qualities. Graduate #2 stated, "It wasn't until I went through Crave that I was able to confidently say, 'Yes, I am a leader."

Multiple members of our discussion groups indicated that they often perceive themselves as lacking access to traditional centers of power, financial resources, and networks that might be available to others. Graduate #7 described a belief that he had the same "work ethic and ambition" as others, but also "wondered why I was less than...these people with more resources and connections". In some cases, these beliefs led to conflicts with visiting speakers who were seen as representing a privileged approach to entrepreneurship. Graduate #7 continued,

The way they solved problems made us feel angered that we couldn't do that...I think about power, how many times that we were able to push back against the white male middle class construct. When I'm with Crave I feel like people are going to be able to hear me.

The concept of "begin heard" and distributing power within Crave was an important theme for many participants. Belief that Crave's leadership valued the input of participants and adjusted the program to meet their needs was seen as critical. Graduate #4 said, "If the organization is willing and able to listen and actually change, then I feel like I belong because I'm respected and I have access to this organization." Graduate #2 referred to,

Being listened to and heard—saying things like, "We could have benefited from this more," and seeing things change in real time.

In their own discussion, Crave's leaders reflected a belief in the value of shared decision making. One leader admitted, "We don't have all the answers," and another stated, "You all have built Crave." Because Crave participants are inclined to see themselves as outsiders lacking access to power and resources, a commitment by the organization to share decision making and adapt to the needs of the group is deeply meaningful. Power sharing reinforces the inclusive environment by establishing norms that participants' voices are valued.

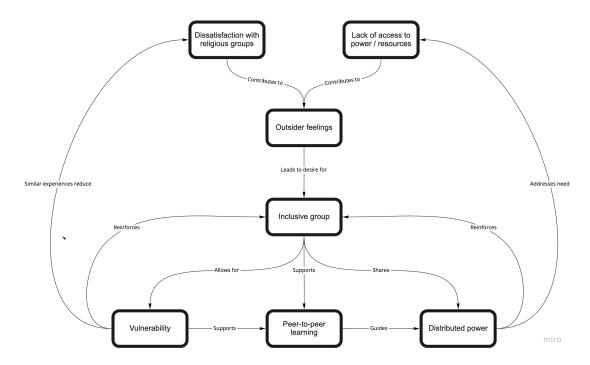


Figure 3: Relationships between the key themes

Connecting Themes

Analysis

The previous section described four major themes that emerged during the Ripple Effect Mapping sessions:

- The value of an inclusive and safe environment that promotes vulnerability
- The role of peer-to-peer learning in Crave groups
- Crave participants' general orientation towards a spiritual worldview, but sense of alienation from mainstream religious groups
- Participants' desires to exercise meaningful power in their group and be acknowledged as experts and leaders

This section describes a theory that relates these four themes. Crave meets an important need for participants by providing a welcoming environment where they can learn, demonstrate expertise, and exercise shared power—opportunities that they see as unavailable through other organizations. Figure 3 illustrates this process graphically.

Crave participants perceive themselves as being, in some sense, "outsiders". They are oriented towards a spiritual worldview, but are dissatisfied with and often feel excluded from organized religious groups. They may also feel a lack of access to centers of power, beneficial networks, and financial resources, and as a result desire opportunities to demonstrate competence and feel self-actualized.

As one leader noted in our discussion, Crave is made up of "people who have been through some shit...and want to turn it into something positive". Note that not all Crave participants would necessarily describe themselves as "outsiders", but the concepts identified in Figure 3 represent important ideas that surfaced repeatedly, from multiple graduates, during our Ripple Effect Mapping sessions.

Crave offers an inclusive and non-judgmental space where outsiders can come together on equal terms. Through a shared presentation of outsider experiences, the group bonds and increases its openness to honesty and interpersonal risk taking.

Because the group allows for vulnerability, participants are able to honestly admit doubts about their own competence and lack of expertise, which the group then addresses through both emotional support and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Leadership supports this process by deferring to the group's expressed needs. The combination of inclusive leadership and peer-to-peer learning creates a distributed power structure, where group members feel a sense of ownership over the direction of the program. Together, distributed power and peer-to-peer learning support participants' felt need for both access to power and self-actualization, which then reinforces a belief in the value of the shared inclusive space.

This cycle continues to reinforce itself: as participants invest in the inclusive group, the group creates opportunities for each member to share access to power and receive emotional support, which promotes deeper engagement with the group.

The role of Crave's leadership is key. Leaders must balance the need to maintain group norms and facilitate the program while also deferring to the group's perspective. It is important that leadership be perceived by the group as possessing personal authority and connection to power and networks, but also willing to defer that power and authority to the wishes of the group.

Implications

This model provides an explanation for the "engine" of Crave—the reason why participants in our group perceived it as successful and beneficial. Changes to the program should be carefully evaluated to ensure that they don't disrupt the beneficial cycles created by the combination of an inclusive environment, peer-to-peer learning, and distributed power sharing.

Commit to a unique vision. There are many other leadership development programs in Central Florida that serve different audiences and provide different services. Crave occupies a unique niche and reaches a population that is currently not well-served by other groups. Crave should build on the strengths of its current model. Ideas that are appropriate for other groups serving different populations—in particular, connected "insiders" who see themselves as part of mainstream community leadership—may be ineffective of harmful for Crave.

Radical inclusion. Inclusion and safety are essential attributes of Crave and are the core driver of the entire group dynamic. Anything that compromises the perception that Crave is a welcoming environment would threaten the integrity of the entire program.

"Outside" vs. "inside". As discussed previously, many (but not necessarily all) Crave participants see themselves as experiencing some degree of marginalization from mainstream religion and professional development institutions. Participants have a strong desire for personal and professional growth, but want to also take a leading role in determining how and when that growth occurs. Attempts to transform participants into "insiders"—that is, to present a top-down model of growth that mimics mainstream concepts of leadership and entrepreneurship—are unlikely to be successful.

Professional development. The most successful professional development workshops focused on concrete business skills like budget reporting and communication, or on interactions with leaders who were able to connect with the group through sharing their own experiences of difficult personal struggles. Presentations by entrepreneurs who were seen as having access to networks and resources were not as successful.

Spiritual development. Crave participants are drawn to the organization because of a desire for spiritual fulfillment, but also want their spiritual progress to happen on their own terms. A completely secular version of Crave could probably exist—with spiritual discussions replaced by generic work on mindfulness and leadership—but removing all spiritual content would deprive the program of much of its richness and a unique place in the Central Florida nonprofit ecosystem.

Power sharing. The opportunity to have a voice in the program is important to many participants. Crave's leaders must remain committed to inclusive and collaborative leadership.

The Community Capitals Framework

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) (Flora et al., 2005) defines seven dimensions of community resources that play a role in building healthy and sustainable cities and regions.

- 1. **Natural capital**. The natural resources and environment of a particular place, which can include traditional exploitable resources, but also encompasses weather, natural features, beauty, and geographic location.
- 2. **Cultural capital**. The traditions, language, heritage, and other expressions of the peoples that live in a community.

- 3. **Human capital**. The ability for community members to acquire new resources, develop knowledge, and pursue opportunities. This capital also encompasses the values of inclusive and proactive community leadership.
- 4. **Social capital**. Connections between individuals and organizations that contribute to development. *Bonding* social capitals are tighter connections that build cohesion within a community. *Bridging* social capitals are looser ties that connect different organizations and subgroups (Emery and Flora, 2006).
- 5. **Political capital**. Access to centers of power, government officials, and the political process. This capital also encompasses the capacity of community members to advocate for their own interests.
- 6. **Financial capital**. Assets available to support capacity-building, including investments in business, social entrepreneurship, and future community development.
- 7. **Built capital.** Physical infrastructure that supports the other capitals, including buildings, transportation, utilities, and digital connectivity.

The CCF is frequently used in extension work, because it acknowledges that communities have many different kinds of assets that can contribute to development (Pigg et al., 2013). Although a single program is unlikely to address all seven capitals, a collection of programs can lead to a "spiraling up", where progress in one area lays the groundwork for growth in others, forming a beneficial and mutually reinforcing cycle of improvement.

Our analysis shows that Crave has been effective in increasing the capacity of its participants in three areas: human, social, and political.

Capital	Contributions
Human	Participation in Crave was a driver of leadership development
	Well-received workshops on professional topics like budgeting and communications
	Peer-to-peer environment develops confidence and promotes self-identification as a leader
Social	Participants created new personal connections with other leaders

Connections were a source of encouragement and social support; participants learned that others were facing the same challenges

Participants gained new awareness of community issues outside of their own organizations

Bonding over shared experiences related to faith, sense of mission, and identity

Participants establish bridging social capital through meetings with leaders and members of outside organizations

Participants may establish collaborations around topics of shared interest

Political Leadership shares power with participants

Participants have the opportunity to meet with well-connected "insiders" and members of local government

Participants are able to "push back" against outside speakers that they see as wrong or out-of-touch

Graduates become future leaders within Crave

In this framework, Crave contributes to the growth of the nonprofit ecosystem in Central Florida by forming stronger social ties between peer leaders (bonding ties) and between nonprofits and other community leaders (bridging ties). In particular, Crave is highly effective at giving participants opportunities to exercise proactive leadership and shared power within the group, which leads to increased confidence and self-actualization that then translate into greater engagement outside of Crave. Participants also acquire concrete skills useful for early-stage social innovators, including guidance on planning, budgeting, and communication.

Conclusion

The nonprofit ecosystem in a community grows stronger when it draws upon a diverse body of leaders who are connected to the needs of their communities. Drawing upon the collective experience of Crave participants, this study has shown that Crave is effective in developing and supporting a collection of leaders who are not currently served by existing nonprofit leadership programs in Central Florida. Our results demonstrate the connection between an inclusive environment and

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successful peer-to-peer learning, as well as the value of collaborative leadership that responds to participants' needs. Our results make a convincing case for the value of Crave within the Central Florida nonprofit ecosystem. Future research in this area can focus on both the longer-term impacts of Crave on its participants and Ripple Effect Mapping studies with other regional nonprofit development and training programs.

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