

Deepen Lead Now

A cohort of learning leaders

Fall 2020 – Spring 2021

How did we do?

Summary report and assessment

Seeing that the world is a living system, that we are all participants in its emergent complexity, and that oppression and trauma are embedded in our society, how do we create together toward an equitable and sustainable future?

The work of social design and participating in long-term, lasting positive change is difficult, uncertain, and evolving. This is one of a series of reports which Fit Associates creates for its internal use, and which we sometimes choose to share publicly. We do so in hope that some may benefit leaders and groups who share our determination to participate in creating an equitable thriving society.

If you quote or share this work, we request that you credit its source.

Fit Associates LLC
fitassociates.com
hello@fitassociates.com

Marc Rettig and Hanna du Plessis, principals

The story in one page	1
The full story	
Introduction	2
Listening to participants	3
The sessions	5
Participants	7
Host-facilitators	8
Value and impact	9

The story in one page

For a Pittsburgh foundation, the pandemic disrupted annual leadership training. They asked us to help.

We started by listening to local mission-driven leaders, and heard about burnout, stress, and desire for community.

I am burnt-out. I know I need rest, ...but it seems impossible.

I find myself in a place that is angry and tired.

I need the energy of others. I need to feel less alone. I need a safe space.

I need help and support. I need to feel like I am being heard.

Over five months, we hosted a community of support and practice, working through topics and skills that too seldom receive attention.

- Strategies for recovering ease and refuge,
- Learning to ask for what you need,
- Practicing ways to connect with others in the midst of discomfort,
- Recovering a connection to “creative making” as a tool for navigating difficulty
- Noticing and accessing the things that deeply nourish and sustain us

People said the community was hugely valuable.

So much work, rest and recovery happened here... I loved resting together.

Learning to listen to myself and create balance in my professional life is completely new to me.

I feel lighter. I needed this. I am enough. All of us are enough.

These sessions remind me I have permission to rest. I take with me the quiet, the rest, the creativity.

I feel more calm, like “life is okay, and you are okay, and we are okay.”

What I thought was a hardworking nature is a complying strategy. I put my personal needs aside, because I want them to think I’m worthy.

Introduction

A need for potent but socially-distanced leadership training

In 2019, our sponsoring organization sent a group of social justice-minded leaders to Rockwood Leadership Institute for leadership training. It was their intention to repeat this for a second cohort in 2020, but the pandemic forced a change in plans. So, they approached Fit Associates with a request to host a virtual retreat for the 2020 cohort of leaders.

Start by listening, let the themes emerge

The first step was to gather the leaders for a listening session. so that the retreat could be shaped around participants' needs. The listening session was held in early June of 2020, and based on the results, Fit harvested a set of themes for the series of leadership sessions.

Those themes were used to invite participants to join the group, accompanied by a survey to help us solidify the content and shape the cadence and schedule for the series.

Principles of good space and good practice

We held nine sessions from September 2020 to January 2021. The two hosts, Hannah du Plessis and Maurice Stevens, designed and guided the sessions according to principles of adaptive space:

- help the group create good space together,
- support people's learning and development through practice,
- include all voices,
- include the whole person through learning, embodiment, and soulful listening and expression.

Listening to participants

How are you doing now? What would help? What is in the way?

Through in-person conversation, emails and a survey, we invited potential participants to let us know about their current challenges, what would be valuable to get from the sessions, and what constraints they face that might affect their participation. Here is the high-level summary of the themes that emerged from their responses.

1. Burnout and stress was a near-universal theme

I'm tired, burnt out, stressed, angry

Burnout makes it hard to tend to my work and myself

I must keep going; it is difficult to let others carry some of the weight

I don't get the support I need

I'm going to try to take time to rest, but it isn't easy for me to do so

2. Constraints that may affect people's participation

My time is hugely constrained

My energy is depleted

I'm an introvert, I am a little shy

3. We asked what people would like get from these sessions

Learn from each other, support each other

Want to be seen and heard by others. Feel less alone. To know that I am enough.

Develop practices of self-care

Want help in cutting back on responsibilities

Program design

Listening to participants

Burnout and stress

I am burnt-out. I know I need to prioritize rest and sustaining myself for community organizing and activism, but it seems impossible....

I am finding myself in a place that is angry and tired.

... it is difficult for me to let other people do the work. I always feel as though it isn't up to the proper standards. I don't really have the time to repeatedly teach people the proper way and I don't really have the time to create an official SOP for the proper way.

Burn-out affects my ability to provide services and do the work I cherish, ...and my daily commitment to being anti-racist.

How can I root myself in this work in a way that I will not become burnt out? How do I cope with constantly advocating for my existence against a power structure that makes me feel so powerless?

Desires for the group

To hopefully have a group of allies where we support each other over the long haul. Learn from each other and truly support each other.

I need to hear your thoughts and experiences, learn how you have come to be the person you are and hopefully connect with you in a way that has always been difficult for me.

I need the energy of others that feel the way that I do. I need to feel less alone. I need someone that I can rally around, because today, I CAN NOT. I need a safe space.

I need people to help and support me. I need to feel like I am being heard at times. I need to feel like we are doing the best we can, even though I know we are.

The sessions

Nine two-hour sessions over four and a half months

Each session followed a similar rhythm

- We started with time to arrive into the moment and reconnect to our bodies
- We then took time to check in with each other
- Then we introduced a topic or theme to explore together
- We concluded with good wishes and something to practice

A library accumulated in a Google folder where participants had access to the notes from each session, and resources to guide and support their practices.

1. Creating our space together

After centering the group's needs for the space, we asked, "What shared agreements and practices will we have with each other to shape this experience into what we need?" The results guided our gatherings for the weeks that followed.

2. Adaptive strategies

We all need a sense of safety, dignity, agency and belonging to be okay. But we grow up in places that often do not affirm our needs. How did we adapt in order to receive a semblance of these needs?

3. Refuge

We can't face what feels so overwhelming without also feeling held. How might we take refuge in our breath, the earth, our ancestors and other elements?

4. What do I need?

Instead of reacting from habit in moments of stress, can we slow down and ask, "What do I need?" This session offers multiple practices to tend to our needs.

5. Practicing together

In this session we practice together how to "let go," "co-hold discomfort and ease" and we engage in a guided writing practice that encourages us to shift our perspective.

continued...

The sessions

...continued

6. Returning home

We explore what “returning home” means, how it feels to “be home,” strategies folks use to “come home.” We then write “from home.”

7. Younger self

We pause to ask, “What are we learning?” Then we engage in writing and art making, gaining perspective and compassion for the ways in which we adapt.

8. Soul medicine

We notice that together we have created a context in which we can access the soul qualities that sustain us, the medicine for our broken hearts. We notice that, even as this group ends, we have access and we have each other.

9. Looking back

We take time to look back on our journey, share our highlights with each other and sit with the feeling of loss and ending.

Session five

PRACTICE: Letting go, co-holding, listening practices

Practice letting go

Xochitl Bervera lead us through a shake-down practice to help us tolerate a wider range of emotions as a way to access our aliveness. The practice starts at 57:00 into the video and goes to 1:02:00 (5 minutes)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3eR-6OAc24

Co-holding practice

Rev angel Kyodo Williams guides us through a practice of being with discomfort. Starts at 8:30 minutes.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH7kh2F-0YQ (8 minutes)

Writing / Listening practice

This practice is based on Alta Starr’s guided practice that helps us shift our perspective from I, to we, to all. Find this at 1:24:00 to 1:28:45 (5 minutes)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3eR-6OAc24

An example of the kinds of support for practices provided in each session, which participants could use to continue their learning outside the sessions, and shape new habits and techniques

Participants

Participants included leaders from these Pittsburgh-area institutions

Mon Valley Initiative

Inside our minds

Pittsburgh Parks

The Citizen Science Lab

Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corporation

Homelessness Fund

Amachi Pgh

Grow Pittsburgh

Union Project / Summit Against Racism

All participants were in manager/director roles in their organizations. The group was racially diverse, with roughly equal participation by black and white leaders as well as one who identifies as Latinx.

Host-facilitators



Maurice Stevens

Maurice brings expertise in designing interdisciplinary and engaged research methodologies, participatory leadership models, and community-driven social justice informed research. He is Professor in the Department of Comparative Studies at the Ohio State University and an adjunct faculty member for the Pacifica Graduate Institute in the department of Depth Psychology's Community, Liberation, and Eco-Psychology Program. Dr. Stevens is also a writing coach for the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. Stevens received their B.A. in Religion and Anthropology from Princeton University and their M.A. and Ph.D. from the interdisciplinary History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.



Hannah du Plessis

Hannah is an artist, educator and facilitator. As principal of Fit Associates she helps groups who can no longer tolerate the status quo enter spaces of transformation where they can see and shift harmful habits, reclaim their capacity to stand in resilient relationships and take effective action to co-creating a just world. Hannah created the Liberated Life course, which gathers cross-race cohorts to practice the skills of community together. Hannah was born and raised in apartheid South Africa. She is a founding professor in the Design for Social Innovation program at the School of Visual Arts, and Adjunct Professor in the CMU School of Design.

PARTICIPANTS SAID...

I so appreciate the fact that we had two people coaching us, reflecting the races and gender expressions in our space.

As an immigrant, it helped me that this group was co-led by a fellow immigrant. It gave me permission to bring stories from home, to not have my English be all perfect.

Value and impact

The impact of the program on participants, in their own words

The following quotes come from our mid-point check in and the final reflection session.

Being in it together

“A big takeaway is the sense of being in a collective space of shared experience—of exhaustion, imposter syndrome, handling trauma. Hearing everyone’s thoughts helps me feel more in community.”

“For the group: knowing that I was not alone. The first session was so opening “I’m dying” I thought there is something wrong with me, but it’s not me. I’m not good at learning on my own. These sessions helped me. I’m afraid of being closed off and ignoring what I am feeling.”

“We don’t have to agree with each other to hold each other again.”

“Looking back, I feel proud. This is the first group I’ve been in where I can say I can check all the boxes that I needed from this space. What the group was established to do, we met those things. We did good. I feel proud of us.”

I was thinking that I was this imposter that was just doing badly by myself. You’re *supposed* to say “I’m exhausted” in the nonprofit space. But here I can unpack it.

The collective process, the willingness to be who we are in the moment, the space is a container to hold all the complexities.

The group accountability helps me. There are other people going through similar things, there is not an answer to the puzzle, just one step forward.

Working with feelings

“Noticing both neutrality and clarity AND churned up feelings and sensation... active nourishment.”

Vulnerability

“The vulnerability of being in the space. The level of comfort I feel to share, taking solace in this vulnerability. This helps me reflect more and think through things.”

I have really liked having a place to share my feelings, I feel really safe when we all meet together. It has helped knowing that I am not the only one who is struggling.

This was an invitation to love. No one is disposable, not even the parts of us that is the hardest to be with.

Value and impact

continued...

Encouragement: refreshed energy and hope

“I feel a bit brighter and happy. It was nice expressing my feelings through pictures—it made it easier to express.”

“I always feel a little more hopeful after spending time together.”

“I am energized by these interactions. I knew I had more work to do after this meeting and I feel more energized and ready to get to it.”

I feel lighter. I came in feeling anxious as if I hadn't had time to prepare or like my work wouldn't be good enough. I needed this...everything else will be there when I am done. I am enough. All of us are enough.

A pause, a place of calm

“I was distracted by all my to-dos. I'm now just here with everyone and appreciating this moment. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do in this moment but this.”

I feel more calm, like “life is okay. and you are okay. and we are okay.”

Time set aside for deep discussion and reflection

“Having scheduled time to have these types of discussions and reflections. If you don't budget it, it doesn't exist. If I don't budget time, the healing I need won't exist... Being invited to practice with a group of people was invaluable for me.”

What I thought was a hardworking nature is a complying strategy. I put my personal needs aside, because I want them to think I'm worthy of being here, that I belong.

Insight into myself

“What do I need?” is a question the space helped me to come back to.”

“Giving myself the permission to ask the question and the time to notice where that lands in my body and then I can care for myself in a way that I need to.”

Learning to listen to myself and create balance in my professional life is completely new to me. Sometimes I need to sit down and connect on an energy level. Connecting this to work was unknown to me.

Value and impact

continued...

Taking this into my days

“The real possibility of rest in the context of a community that is so dedicated to working for change. Showing up over and over again here helped me align with the deeper knowing [that rest is available] and it is powerful.”

“I have a belief that the work towards a thriving world can support our thriving, but not a practice that embodies it. So much of my work is fist-up striving leading to this feeling of burn-out. Being with you all showed me that work can be regenerative.”

Taking this into my organization

People shared how they are extending practices of rest into their organization. This includes...

- Being more genuine (more myself and less the role) at work and able to invite others into these practices
- Giving people a day off
- Changing meeting pace to be more easeful and making space for people to things that impact them positively
- Implementing rest moments where folks are invited to “just sit around, stretch and rest.”
- Creating a dedicated space for rest in the organization’s offices

I have a lot of anxiety when I am not working every minute of everyday. Taking these two hours reminds me that I have permission to rest. I deserve it, need it and it is mine... I am taking with me the quiet, the rest, the creativity, the opportunity to return to self over and over again.

So much work, rest and recovery happened here... I loved resting together.

I realize that people need to rest. Work should not be all go-go. I’m giving my employee a day off next week. She deserves it.



Thank you.

Fit Associates LLC
fitassociates.com
hello@fitassociates.com

Marc Rettig and Hanna du Plessis, principals