

Leap Ambassadors Community History

In the Beginning....

The Leap Ambassadors Community's founding date is in 2013, but the work that spanned the prior three years laid the foundation for the community.

Leap of Reason

In the last quarter of 2009, **Mario Morino** attended three meetings with different social-sector players— funders, policy types, consultants. But no practicing nonprofit leaders and only a few others who had walked in nonprofit shoes were present. In each meeting, there was ardent zeal to define outcomes that nonprofits should be achieving. As an ex-CEO, he knew he would have been infuriated if other leaders had suggested how his business should run. So, he spent the early part of 2010 ticked off. And, over the years, the team has learned that the antidote for him to be “unticked” is to write and then share. So, he wrote four Venture Philanthropy Partners' columns (e.g., [here](#)) on the importance of managing to outcomes and always keeping the “To What End?” question front and center.

In July of that year, the idea for a monograph, anchored by a core essay from Mario, surfaced and the next 10 months can only be described as a blur...blunt pushback from truth-tellers on the tone and substance of an early draft of the core essay; discussions yielded six essays from sector thought leaders; more iterations of the various parts/pieces than you can imagine; a weekend spent writing (and rewriting) two chapters in Mario's essay; a launch campaign plan that included 30+ segments, all with personalized messages; and a distribution “center” set up in a vacant bank branch (now home to the Morino Ventures team) where 5,000 signed books were paired with personalized letters for the first mailing. We ordered 12,000 print copies—wondering what we would do with the extra copies once we mailed them to most of the social-sector folks we knew. Truth-teller **Nan Stone** kept us grounded: “The book is ok, but the timing is excellent.”

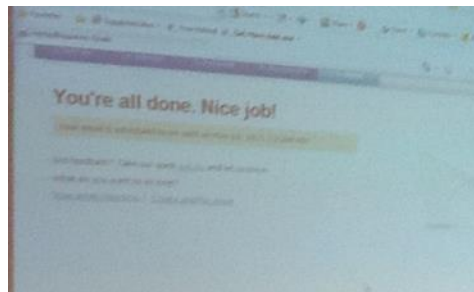
On May 19, 2011, *Leap of Reason*, the little book with the “radioactive broccoli” cover made its debut. Many leaders, who became Leap Ambassadors, made intellectual contributions to the book: **Mike Bailin** (thought partner), **Elizabeth Boris** (reviewer), **Isaac Castillo** (essayist), **Cheryl Collins** (co-editor), **Carol Thompson Cole** (Foreword), **Harry Hatry** (reviewer), **David Hunter** (essayist and invaluable gadfly), **Darin McKeever** (reviewer), **Amy Morgenstern** (thought partner), **Kris Moore** (essayist), **Nancy Osgood** (thought partner), **Lynn Taliento** (Introduction), **Lou Salza** (thought partner), **Steve Seleznow** (thought partner), **Bill Shore** (thought partner), **Ed Skloot** (thought partner), **Nan Stone** (reviewer), **Bob Templin** (thought partner), **Victoria Vrana** (thought partner), **Karen Walker** (essayist), **Mary Winkler** (reviewer), and **Lowell Weiss** (co-editor).



Fulfillment team, May 2011



Mario and Matt press launch



Confirmation that book is available

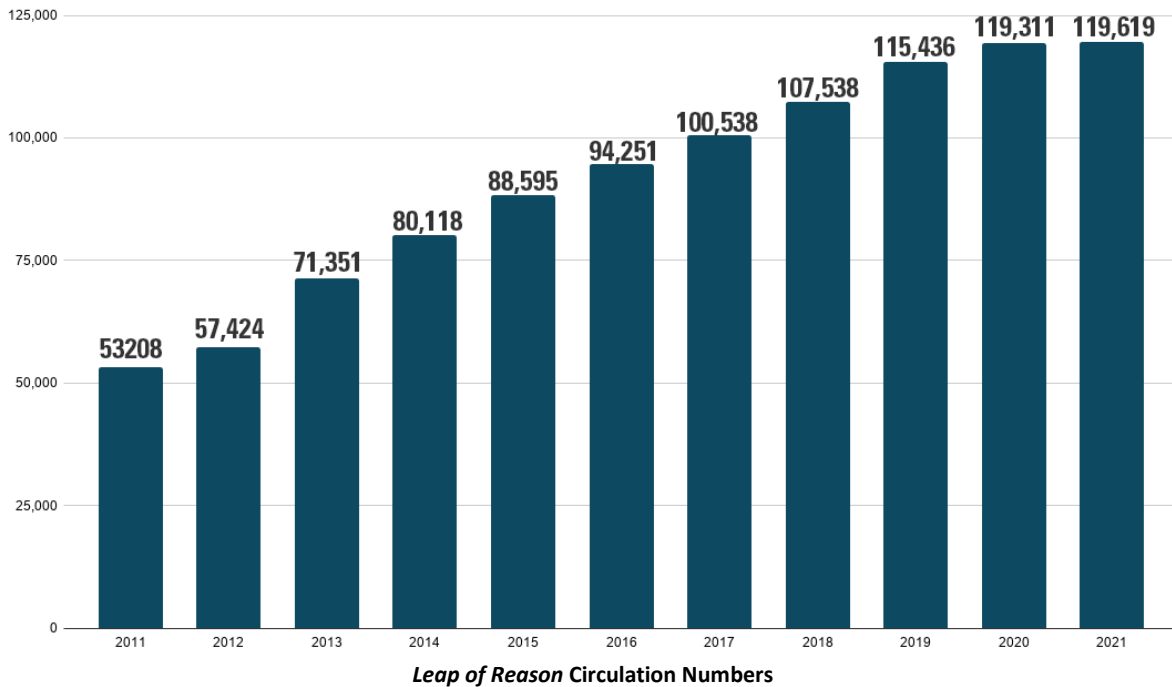
In October 2011, a think-tank session, hosted by Urban Institute's **Elizabeth Boris** and **Mary Winkler** and attended by now-ambassadors **Mike Bailin**, **Dan Cardinali**, **Paul Carttar**, **Isaac Castillo**, **Carol Thompson**

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Cole, Lou Erste, Anne Goodman, Irv Katz, Bridget Laird, Pat Lawler, Kris Moore, Nadya Shmavonian, Mindy Tarlow, Victoria Vrana, and other sector luminaries amplified the book’s messages.

Meanwhile, Mario and the Morino Institute team were making site visits to high-performing organizations, including Cleveland Clinic, Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO), Roca, Youth Villages, Lawrence School, Congreso, EL Haynes Charter School, Friendship Public Charter School, Strive, and St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund.

Who knew the little book with the “radioactive broccoli” cover would catch on?! Almost 10 years later, there are now almost 120,000 copies in circulation.



What’s an Online Community?

In May 2012, the Leap of Reason team convened about a dozen nonprofit CEOs at the Rockefeller Foundation. “A core group of outstanding ‘doers’ could use this moment to spark cross-sector ... support [for] those nonprofit and public-sector leaders who have the courage to be relentless in pursuit of high performance for greater social impact.” The concept of a “learning community of leaders” committed to performance movement was introduced to **Mike Bailin, Patricia Brantley, Phil Buchanan, Dan Cardinali, Carol Thompson Cole, Cynthia Figueroa, Darell Hammond, Pat Lawler, Marc Spencer, Mindy Tarlow, and Nadya Shmavonian.**



Nadya Shmavonian, Phil Buchanan



Pat Lawler



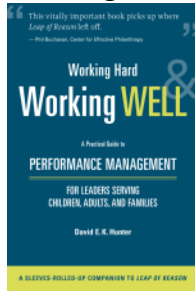
Dan Cardinali

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Through NO fault of the attendees, we realized about two hours into the meeting that we weren't getting any traction. And follow-up emails about the session got NO response. We did receive a few "eye rolls" and "You've got to be kidding me!" type of responses in some one-on-one conversations in the weeks following the meeting.

We moved on (well, kinda), at least for the time being.

Working Hard—and Working Well



In February 2013, the Leap of Reason picks up team published **David Hunter's** [*Working Hard—and Working Well*](#). David shared all the intellectual property he's used for years in his famous Theory of Change workshops, and the book provided a valuable complement to *Leap of Reason*.

Reviews like this one from **Beth Kanter** said it best: "*Working Hard—and Working Well* describes performance assessment in a way that won't make it seem scary or worse—boring."

Community Growth

Because of the [Netpreneur](#) initiative's success in the mid- to late 90s, Mario, Lowell, and Cheryl strongly believed in the power of online community and weren't ready to give up on the idea that was pitched in New York City in June 2012. So, from December 2012 to June 2013, a few of us worked on developing a "presentation of presentations" to describe what we envisioned as the community's purpose. We reached out to **Ayo Atterberry, Steve Butz, Isaac Castillo, Tim Delaney, Matt Forti, Anne Goodman, Ingvild Bjornvold, David Hunter, Amy Morgenstern, Nancy Osgood, Lou Salza, Daniel Stid, Mary Winkler, and Denise Zeman**.

Despite feedback from these fine folks (later dubbed as "founding ambassadors"), the idea didn't get any uptake. Taking a page from *Leap*, we course corrected and spent the rest of that year crafting the idea of the community. We reached out to another 30+ individuals to form the nucleus of a community of ambassadors to share views, learn from each other, produce collaborative works, help one another, and benefit from the community's collective knowledge and experience—all to advance the importance that "performance matters" and mission and performance are inextricably linked.

In parallel, the team partnered with PerformWell (led by ambassadors **Steve Butz** and **Adrian Bordone** with ambassadors **Elizabeth Boris, Kris Moore, and Mary Winkler** in advisory oversight role) to host the "After the Leap" conference in Washington, DC.



More than 400 leaders participated in the two-day event. Some of those attendees are now ambassadors.

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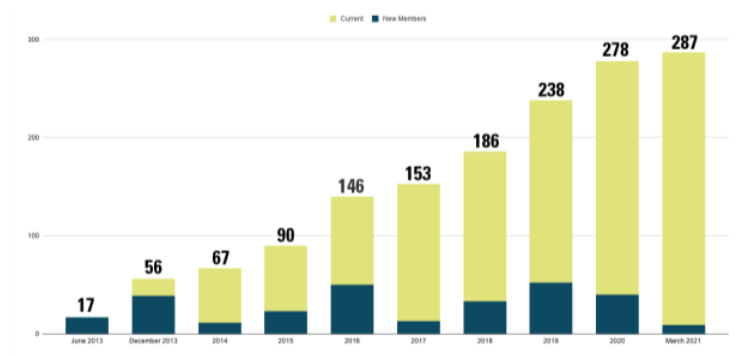


As part of the December 2013 conference, Leap Ambassadors had dinner together, later described as a “magic” moment in the history of the community—as shared affinity, passion, and energy filled the room.

One participant said, “It was wonderful to watch people putting names and faces together and then rapidly engaging in conversation that quickly moved beyond small talk.”

By September 2015, the community had grown to 90 ambassadors, thanks to the efforts of **Sam Cobbs** and **Steve Butz** who led the effort to develop and codify candidate sourcing, vetting, and onboarding processes. With 120 ambassadors onboard by September 2016, Steve handed over community growth to **Denise Zeman** with the charge to further improve the selection and onboarding process. **Linda Johaneck** and **Liz Walters** joined the team in August 2017, and they further improved on the process. A key addition was the candidate questionnaire that candidates complete as part of the process. Today, Linda continues as team lead for Community Growth, and **Veronica Dubravetz** serves as the Community Manager.

In response to the 2017 Reflection Survey comments, the GrowCom micro-community and the Leap support team placed an even greater emphasis on increasing the community’s diversity in October 2018. Currently, more than 25% of community members are Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, or Multi-racial leaders and many ambassadors continue to focus more on equity and inclusion.



Community Growth 2013-2021

As of May 3, 2021, the community has 296 active and affiliate ambassadors.

Online Forum.... Slow but Steady

Mario posted the first message to the online forum on February 7, 2013. Approximately 3,800 messages later, the online forum has finally (!) come into its own over the past year. March 12, 2020, marked the first mention of COVID-19 on the forum. Since then, ambassadors have posted more than 800 messages of all kinds—requests for assistance, resource sharing, lessons learned, etc. That’s ~21 percent of ALL messages since the community began.

In the early days of the community, the Leap support team did indeed post a large number of messages and many ambassadors indicated they were overwhelmed and couldn’t keep up. After the 2017 Reflection Questionnaire survey results were analyzed, the team became even more mindful of the length and frequency of messages from the team and set up an option for Active Ambassadors to move from individual messages to digest format. As a result, the team has sent only 20% of the messages between November 2017 and now...the online forum is working as we hoped.

Also, the team had learned enough from the evaluators in the group to know that a single variable didn’t trigger this change. Was it that community membership was closer to reaching “critical mass” that Mario had talked about? Was it that people were able to monitor the forum more efficiently? Was it

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that ambassadors were seeing the value from other questions posted? We really don't know and are okay with that. We're simply delighted that the forum seems to be working in the way we intended eight years ago!

An ambassador summed it up this way: "The community has been in overdrive (in response to the pandemic) which is proof point of its value. It has more value than we probably know."

Ambassador Engagement

Over the years, we've learned more about how ambassadors engage with each other that leads to a more vibrant community. Besides the online forum, ambassadors engage through nominating candidates for consideration, responding to Ambassador Vetting Surveys, joining micro-communities, participating in Community Conversations, interacting with support team members by phone and email, and connecting with other ambassadors for one-on-one conversations.

Since the community began, the support team has asked community members to provide feedback on community priorities through an Opportunity Survey (2015), Major Issues Survey (2016), and the Reflection Questionnaire (2017).

Thanks to the Opportunity Survey (2015), community priorities for 2016-2017 included:

- Building community
- Making the case for high performance and self-assessment
- Holding an in-person Ambassadors Convening
- Applying the Performance Imperative to small nonprofits.

The Major Issues Survey (2016) prioritized these topics:

- Leadership/Talent Gap
- Infrastructure Investment
- Existential Threats, Improving Public Funding and Pay for Success/SIBs.

The Reflection Questionnaire (2017) helped the community

- Celebrate its progress
- Course correct
- Plan for how it can better meet its mission.

The feedback from these surveys framed the major priorities for the years to come:

- Continuing to build the online community
- Providing a way to self-assess an organization, based on the Performance Imperative, resulting in the Performance Practice
- Doing more to influence funders to help their grantees through funder profiles and the monograph
- Doing more to consider small nonprofits.

We kicked off 2018 with a 29-minute personal video from **Mario Morino** to the Leap Ambassadors. The informal video about where we've been and where we're headed struck a chord with many ambassadors and sparked engaging conversations on multiple fronts. **Kevin Jones**, team lead for engagement, continues to find new ways for ambassadors to engage with the support team and each other. Other team members, including **Ingvild Bjornvold**, **Cheryl Collins**, **Linda Johanek**, and **Mary Winkler** are assigned as primary contacts to ambassadors although the entire support team is always happy to assist.

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High Tech AND High Touch...

In February 2016, eight ambassadors had dinner at EDWIN's in Cleveland, and the idea of regional ambassador gatherings gained traction. From then until November 2019, 133 ambassadors attended at least one of the 27 hosted gatherings which indicated there was an interest in getting together with other ambassadors in their regions.



Cleveland



San Francisco



Boston



Philadelphia



New York



London

2016 Convening

In November 2016, the Cleveland Leap team loaded up a bus with customized M&Ms and more boxes that you can imagine to hit the road to Washington, DC, for the community's first full convening that piggybacked on the Independent Sector conference. Eighty-two leaders came together to build community, advance major issues, and introduce collaboratively developed products. The combination of full group sessions and small breakout discussions, a festive reception and dinner, and time to mingle for lunch and breakfast provided opportunities for people to meet for the first time, establish stronger peer relationships, participate in a wide range of discussions, and learn more about the community.



Cleveland team



Catherine Lester, Lew Feldstein



Full sessions



Dinner at Roofers Union



The infamous M&Ms



DONE!

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Collective Intelligence and Collaborative Resource Development

The community benefits from the collective wealth and diversity of knowledge and experience of ambassadors. Our disciplined, collaborative approach gives ambassadors the opportunity to share their insights, have those insights augmented and constructively debated via community exchange, and produce thoughtful works that consider diverse viewpoints. Cohort learning, whether through active engagement or passive observation, provides a powerful learning environment.

Community's Flagship Resources

In March 2014, **Cynthia Figueroa**, **Mike Bailin**, **Gordon Berlin**, **Paul Carttar**, **David Hunter**, **Lynn Taliento**, **Mario Morino**, and **Lowell Weiss** met in New York City at MDRC's office to develop answers to the following questions:

- Should we continue to use the term “high-performance organization”—or is there a more effective, clearer term?
- If so, what is high performance?
- Why is high performance important?
- What are the key organizational and programmatic pillars that must be in place for an organization to achieve high performance?

From that conversation, dozens of ambassadors engaged in highly iterative and interactive community-based process of defining “high performance” and the seven organizational disciplines that contribute to high performance. **Phil Buchanan** later commented, “I thought this would be like herding cats, but this process works.”

In February 2015, the Performance Imperative launched via email and social media platforms and version 2.0 became publicly available in April 2018. Almost 51,000 copies have been shared.

Brad Dudding's adaptation of the Performance Imperative to assess his own organization's progress sparked the idea for creating the Performance Imperative Organizational Self-Assessment (PIOSA), now known as the Performance Practice. Introduced at the 2016 Ambassadors Convening, more than 26,000 copies of the modules have been downloaded.

Debra Natenshon and **Karen Walker** brought a group of ambassadors together to develop ways to apply the Performance Imperative for small nonprofits. They led a micro-community that developed a roadmap to high performance, specifically for small nonprofit organizations (budgets from \$100K to \$3M). “Small, but Mighty: The Performance Imperative for Small Nonprofits” was the first organically developed community product.

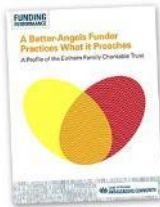
One important shift in the messaging about performance resulted from following leading healthcare organizations' approach to quality and improvement. Discussing performance in terms of "continuous improvement" is generally more well received and, in reality, more precisely aligned to how organizations adapt and improve rather than through imposed change.

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Shining a Spotlight on Funders

After months of funder interviews done by **Margot Rogers**, Lowell, and others, the Leap Ambassadors support team determined that the best lever to influence funders was by sharing stories of positive outliers who are helping their grantees pursue high performance. The first profile was published in June 2017 and the most recent profile was launched in April 2021.

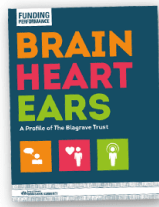
Funding Performance Profiles



Einhorn



Impetus-PEF



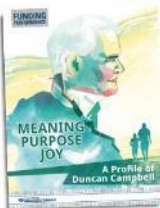
Blagrove Trust



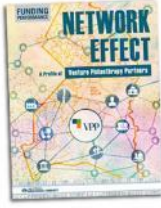
Weingart Foundation



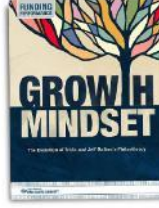
Mulago Foundation



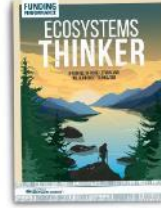
Duncan Campbell



Venture Philanthropy Partners



Raikes Foundation



*Rose Letwin/
Wilburforce
Foundation*



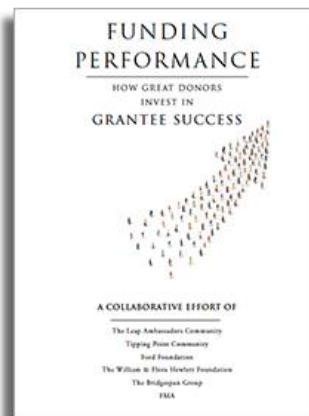
CT Opportunity Project

Funding Performance: How Great Donors Invest in Grantee Success

“Rising to Our Times: The Five Habits of Highly Effective Funders” by Lowell Weiss

“Are You Helping Grantees Succeed—Or Trying to Catch Them Messing Up?” by Sam Cobbs

If Not Now, When?: From Virtue Signaling to Self Examination by Hilary Pennington



“We Depend on Well-Led and Well-Managed Grantees” by Daniel Stid

“Accelerating the Movement Toward Funding Practices That Strengthen Nonprofits” by Jeri Queenan and Jeff Bradach

“What Grantees Need From Funders at This Time of Tumultuous Change” by Hilda Polanco and Deborah Linnell

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Ambassador Insights

The first Ambassador Insight was prompted in February 2015 by an inquiry from **Anne Goodman** on structuring a dedicated role for outcomes and evaluation. Since then, ambassadors have produced 17 Insights.

Ambassador Insights



Additionally, the community has produced other resources from its collective intelligence, including

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summaries and recaps of online discussions, Performance in Action stories, and one-pagers.

Message Amplification

In early 2017, it became clear that we had lots of valuable content to share with the field. The support team began sending weekly emails on the community's behalf. The *Leap Update*, a monthly newsletter from Mario and Lowell, includes updates from the community. **Beth Owens** and **Linda Sowers** draft the content for the other three weekly emails, and **Jessica Berkshire** produces the emails and manages the distribution to more than 21,000 engaged subscribers.

Leap Ambassadors also spread the word through their own networks, and many are widely sought-after speakers who share the message of high performance in keynote speeches, panels, and other presentations.

The community's social media platforms are managed by **Beth Owens** and provide real-time updates on community resources and resources that ambassadors are sharing from their organizations. Content for the YouTube channel is edited and produced by **Matt T. Morino** and **Katie Reinart** handles fulfillment requests.

Operational Support

Morino Institute/Ventures associates who spend a great deal of time providing backbone/operational support to the community include:

- Direct support: **Jessica Berkshire, Ingvild Bjornvold, Cheryl Collins, Veronica Dubravetz, Linda Johaneck, Kevin Jones, Mario Morino, Matt T. Morino, Beth Owens, Katie Reinart, Julie Russell, Samantha Sherrod, Linda Sowers, Lowell Weiss, and Mary Winkler.**
- Indirect support: **Shirley Marcus Allen, Tom Clark, Jarvis Gibson, Tim Goler, Tish James, Rich McDonnell, and Matt Morino.**

The Future

Mario and the team began speaking about the community's future in early 2018. In the video [Reflecting, Adapting, Moving Forward](#), Mario talked about the power of having 300 ambassadors in the community and how it could lead to a strong, vibrant place where ambassadors could reach out for advice, encouragement, and help. Three-plus years later, we're seeing at least part of that vision coming true, but there's more work to do.

In October 2019, the team shared a draft of a [Strategy for Change](#), asked for feedback, and announced a campaign that would include visits to multiple cities for in-person gatherings as well as webinars to ensure that ambassadors were in full support of the strategy. We also announced that Morino Ventures/Institute and the Leap Ambassadors support team would continue to provide the financial and logistical backing for the community through 2023. Well before then, the ambassadors would need to understand and assess the interest, willingness, and availability of those in the community to determine what happens after 2023. **Julie Russell** joined the team in February 2020, to lead the futures work, initially with Mario with plans for her to continue with interested ambassadors. Possible scenarios included continuing the current community as a new entity with its own governance, assets, support team, and funding; consolidating it with an established institution; sunsetting the operation by memorializing the community, recognizing the ambassadors, and ensuring its rich base of content is available to benefit the field.

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In March 2020, just as support team members were ready to get on airplanes to head to a city near you, COVID raged and was quickly followed by economic and social-justice crises. The campaign was canceled within days of Julie coming onboard. As the weeks of lockdown continued, the team knew it had to face the reality of the times, pivot its work to the “here and now,” and focus even more on the importance of mission rethink, resiliency, and adaptiveness to help nonprofits sustain, survive, or exit gracefully via consolidation or sunset. As part of the “here-and-now” approach, Julie became Executive Director of the Leap support team in July 2020.

The community is based on the importance of a continuous improvement approach to high performance (i.e., “getting better at getting better”). Equity and inclusion are essential for an organization to achieve high performance. The support team’s journey toward equity and inclusion is (and always will be) a “work in progress.” Equity and inclusion aren’t simply topics; we strive to have these beliefs ingrained in our minds, culture, and behavior.

Ironically, the reactions to the pandemic, economic, and social-justice crises may well have caused the community to define itself naturally and organically and see more ambassadors’ alignment to it—something we hoped for in 2013.

The next chapter of the community is still to be written and it’s up to Leap Ambassadors to craft it. The support team is ready to assist. Are you ready to go?