

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. In each meeting, there was ardent zeal to define outcomes that nonprofits should be achieving. But no practicing nonprofit leaders and only a few others who had walked in nonprofit shoes were present. 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 at Morino Ventures 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, always keeping the “To What End?” question front and center, and letting nonprofit leaders determine what their organizations need to deliver meaningful, measurable, and financially sustainable results for the people or causes they serve.

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 that 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 (that became home to the Morino Ventures team) where 5,000 signed copies of *Leap of Reason* 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.”

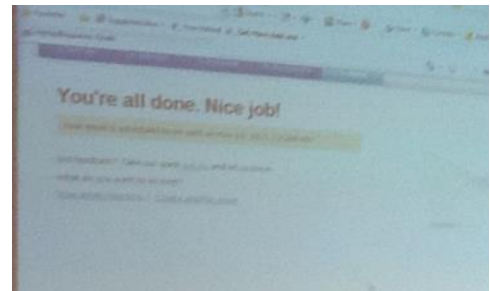
On May 19, 2011, *Leap of Reason*, the little book anchored by an essay written by Mario made its debut. Many leaders, who became Leap Ambassadors, made intellectual contributions to the book: **Mike Bailin** (thought partner), **Elizabeth Boris** (reviewer), **Isaac Castillo** (essayist), **Carol Thompson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



Fulfillment team, May 2011



Mario & Matt at press launch



Confirmation that book is available

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In October 2011, a think-tank session, hosted by now-ambassadors **Elizabeth Boris** and **Mary Winker** from Urban Institute and attended by now-ambassadors **Mike Bailin**, **Dan Cardinali**, **Paul Carttar**, **Isaac Castillo**, **Carol Thompson 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 Ventures 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?! More than 10 years later, there are now more than 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. 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

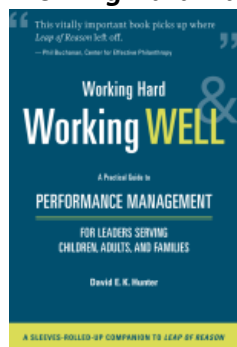


Dan Cardinali

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 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.'" Ten years later, there are almost 40,000 copies of *Working Hard—and Working Well* in circulation.

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

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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**, **Ingvild Bjornvold**, **Steve Butz**, **Isaac Castillo**, **Tim Delaney**, **Matt Forti**, **Anne Goodman**, **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 Leap 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 idea that "performance matters" and mission and performance are inextricably linked.

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



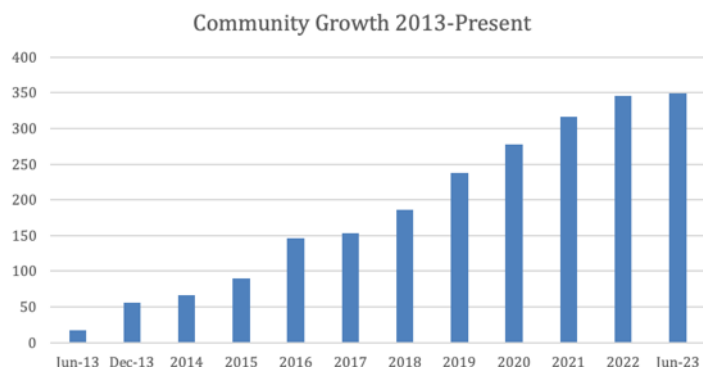
More than 400 leaders participated in the two-day event. Some of those attendees are now ambassadors.



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. **Veronica Dubravetz** served as the Community Manager.



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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. In July 2021, the community achieved a major milestone of 300 members. As of May 30, 2023, the community has 349 active and affiliate ambassadors. Active ambassadors participate in all aspects of the community while affiliates are not part of the online forum. More than 31 percent of community members are Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, or Multi-racial leaders.

Online Forum.... Slow but Steady

Mario posted the first message to the online forum on February 7, 2013. Approximately 4,900 messages later, the online forum finally (!) came into its own. March 12, 2020, marked the first mention of COVID-19 on the forum. Since then, ambassadors have posted almost 2,100 messages of all kinds—requests for assistance, resource sharing, lessons learned, etc. That's ~40 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 a digest format. As a result, the team has sent only about 10 percent of the messages between November 2017 and June 2023, with ambassadors contributing the rest. 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 the "critical mass" that Mario had talked about? Was it that people were able to monitor the forum more efficiently? Was it 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 a decade ago!

One 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 and how that can lead 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, attending in-person and virtual regional gatherings, 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), the Reflection Questionnaire (2017), and the Candidate Vetting Surveys (two per year 2016-2022).

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

- Building community
- Making the case for high performance and self-assessment

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- 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 (initially named the PIOSA: Performance Imperative Organizational Self-Assessment)
- 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, continued to find new ways for ambassadors to engage with the support team and each other. Other Leap support team members, including **Ingvild Bjornvold**, **Cheryl Collins**, **Linda Johaneck**, and **Samantha Sherrod** served as primary contacts to ambassadors although the entire support team was always happy to assist.

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 May 2023, more than 200 ambassadors have attended at least one of the in-person hosted gatherings. Seventy-seven ambassadors attended one of nine virtual gatherings since the first was hosted in 2020.



Cleveland



San Francisco



Philadelphia

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New York



London



Virtual

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!

2021 Convening

The Leap Ambassadors Community hosted a three-day virtual convening on May 4-6, 2021. The convening included opening and closing plenary sessions, 22 peer-to-peer sessions, and networking events. Approximately 57 percent of the Leap Ambassadors Community, or 170 of 297 ambassadors at the time, attended at least one virtual session. Sixty-seven ambassadors volunteered to present or facilitate a session. More details about the convening are available in the [Leap Ambassadors 2021 Convening Survey Report](#).

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.

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Community's Flagship Resources

In March 2014, **Mike Bailin, Gordon Berlin, Paul Carttar, Cynthia Figueroa, David Hunter, Mario Morino, Lynn Taliento, 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 we continue to use the term, 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 a 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. Version 2.0 became publicly available in April 2018. As of June 2023, more than 52,000 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.

Shining a Spotlight on Funders

After months of funder interviews done by **Margot Rogers, Lowell Weiss, 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 final profile was launched in April 2021. [Funding Performance: How Great Donors Invest in Grantee Success](#), published in February 2021, is a collection of essays from some of the sector's most respected thought leaders.

Funding Performance Profiles

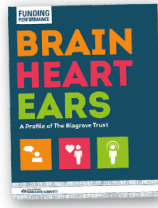
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Einhorn



Impetus-PEF



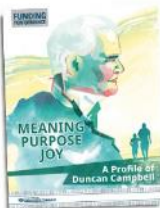
Blagrove Trust



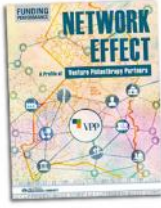
Weingart Foundation



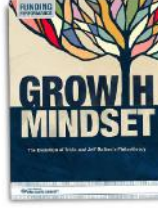
Mulago Foundation



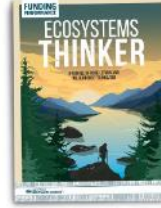
Duncan Campbell



Venture Philanthropy Partners



Raikes Foundation



*Rose Letwin/
Wilburforce
Foundation*



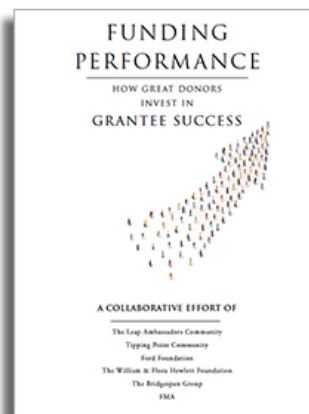
CT Opportunity Project

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

Ambassador Insights and Other Resources

The first Ambassador Insight was prompted in February 2015 by an inquiry from **Anne Goodman** on structuring a dedicated role for outcomes and evaluation. As of July 2023, ambassadors have produced more than 25 [Ambassador Insights](#).

Additionally, the community has produced other resources from its collective intelligence, including [Where We Bank Matters: A Community Bank Guide for Nonprofits](#), summaries and recaps of online discussions, [Performance in Action stories](#), and one-pagers. To address “Here and Now” issues, the community compiled [equity resources](#), and a [bibliography of ambassador-authored books](#). In late 2022, the LAC support team collaboratively developed a new resource, [The Whole is Greater](#), to share their learned experiences, tips, and lessons learned from nearly ten years of serving as the backbone of the LAC.

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In 2022, the Leap support team began a series of interviews with ambassadors entitled '[Leap Voices](#)', with the aim of lifting up the importance of equity and high performance. Between May 2022 and July 2023, Leap Voices shared the voices and experiences of 11 Leap Ambassadors.

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 that began with the publication of *Leap of Reason* and continued until March 2022, included updates from the community. Up until September 2023, **Beth Owens** and **Linda Sowers** drafted the content for the other three weekly emails, and **Jessica Berkshire** produced the emails and managed 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.

Until September 2023, the community's social media platforms were managed by **Beth Owens** and provided real-time updates on community resources and resources that ambassadors are sharing from their organizations. Content for the YouTube channel was edited and produced by **Matt T. Morino**, and **Katie Reinart** handled fulfillment requests.

The Future Beyond December 2023

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, then 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.

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.

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From July 2020 until mid-2022, the online forum flourished and the Leap support team continued to curate and develop content, based on discussions and other topics of interest. The team also spent time planning and preparing for the 2021 virtual conference.

Leap Futures Initiative

The Leap Futures Initiative kicked off in February 2022 with a [letter](#) from Mario Morino and an [overview](#) describing the process and stages of the initiative. In March 2022, Monitor Institute by Deloitte (MIbD) was named as facilitator for the initiative. Ambassadors **Dana O'Donovan** and **Rhonda Evans** served as the principals for the engagement. The [Spring Survey 2022](#) captured ambassadors' input on the direction of the LAC and to understand how they would like to be involved in shaping its future. A Steering Committee formed to determine options for community governance and a minimal viable plan (MVP). [Steering Committee updates](#) and regular town halls kept ambassadors informed.

From March 2022 until January 2023, MIbD facilitated the LFI process, and the LFI Steering Committee (SteerCo) worked diligently to define a path forward for the community to continue. The SteerCo arrived at three possible scenarios—best case, intermediary warehousing, and community sunset.

The SteerCo and MIbD initiated discussions with several potential candidate organizations. In late January, those discussions began to focus on one organization as the top choice since it was well aligned to the community's purpose and particularly suited to taking ownership of the community.

On February 1, 2023, MIbD passed the baton to ambassador **Andrew Niklaus** of Venture Leadership Collective, supported by ambassador **Debra Natenshon**, for a four-month engagement to lead SteerCo efforts to secure an anchor partner and funding, no later than May 31.

On March 30, 2023, ambassadors learned that the National Council of Nonprofits, led by CEO **Tim Delaney**, had reached agreement in principle to become the new home for the Leap Ambassadors Community. An astonishing 82 percent of active ambassadors confirmed the partnership through a final questionnaire.

On June 27, 2023, a [press release](#) announced that the LAC is now part of the National Council of Nonprofits (NCN).

High-performance organizations need to pause occasionally to reflect on how best to fulfill their potential. The current transition of the LAC's support from the Morino Institute to NCN provides a natural opportunity for the LAC to engage in reflective elements of Pillar One, such as "listen and respond to the needs of the people being served," "assess effectiveness by asking what our constituents need to make their lives better," and determine "not only what the organization should be doing but also what it should stop doing."

By late September 2023, a joint NCN/LAC planning committee will begin exploring what LAC 2.0 could become starting in 2024. Once the plans are developed and funding commitments are fully realized in early 2024, NCN plans to hire someone to support the planned direction.

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Appendix I

Leap Ambassadors support team (as of May 31, 2023)

Jessica Berkshire	Shirley Marcus Allen
Ingvild Bjornvold	Rich McDonnell
Tom Clark	Mario Morino
Cheryl Collins	Matt Morino
Veronica Dubravetz	Matt T. Morino
Jarvis Gibson	Christina Morris
Tim Goler	Beth Owens
Tish James	Katie Reinart
Linda Johaneck	Linda Sowers
Kevin Jones	

Alumni support team members (2013-2023)

Mike Bailin	Margot Rogers
Adrian Bordone	Julie Russell
Steve Butz	Samantha Sherrod
Tim Greenleaf	Liz Walters
Kyle Maurath-Petras	Lowell Weiss
Josh Maxwell	Mary Winkler
Amy Morgenstern	Denise Zeman
Katie Paris	