

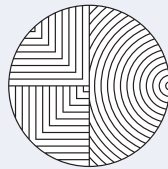


YEARS

10 LESSONS

A "REFLECTION-COLLECTION"
BY VENTURE LEADERSHIP
COLLECTIVE





Venture Leadership
C O L L E C T I V E

Over the past decade, Venture Leadership Collective (VLC) has grown, adapted, and learned alongside the communities and organizations we serve. Each year has brought new challenges and opportunities, pushing us to reflect on what truly drives impact and what it takes to build lasting change.

As we celebrate 10 years, we reflect on the most important lessons from our journey—insights that have shaped our work, deepened our values, and guided our vision for the future. In the client testimonials that follow, you will see these lessons take shape and become embedded in our clients' impact and organizations. We invite you to reflect on the lessons we learned over a decade of increasing nonprofit effectiveness and advancing missions in communities across the country.

At the heart of these lessons and stories is an essential truth that we honor: accountable impact means staying proximate to the people we serve. Their truth, their voice, their power — that's the real measure of whether our work is working.

To our clients, partners, practitioners, funders, and friends who have trusted VLC over these 10 years: THANK YOU for believing that our community impact depends on our efficacy to withstand the passage of time.

A special thank you to Maya Smith, VLC's Collective Engagement Advisor, for gathering and adapting these powerful testimonials so we may harness and share this collective wisdom with our sector.

With love and solidarity,

Team VLC

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YEARS

10 LESSONS



Turnover cannot be a crisis.

If we're serious about our missions, we must be just as serious about building systems that survive our departure.



An attitude of gratitude is a leadership strategy.

Meaningful gestures (a thank you note, a small gift, a moment of acknowledgment) aren't extras. They open trust, reciprocity, and shared humanity.



Humble curiosity is the single most important leadership asset.

The leaders we admire most are confident enough to stand in their truth, AND humble enough to re-examine it. Creating space to ask, "What had to be true for this to exist?" honors an origin story and invites co-creation.



Clarity forces equitable alignment.

When we are clear about vision, roles, and direction, we insulate against bias and empower agency. Clarity also means bravely saying, "This is who we are NOT."



You are not the banner you carry.

When we over-identify with our role (Founder, Fixer), we risk burnout and block others from co-owning the mission. You are so much more than the mission you are supporting at this moment—find your purpose and see how this current role serves it.



Our departure is a gift.

Just like we prepare carefully for travel, we should plan our work transitions the same way — strengthening systems so the mission carries forward without us at the center.



The plan is the plan. Pace accordingly.

Overwhelm usually signals a need to recalibrate, not accelerate. Match the plan to your true resources, not wishful thinking.



Be hard on systems, soft on people.

Practice accountability, but remember: people aren't the broken systems they operate within. Meet imperfection with grace and root in your values.



Never waste a good mistake.

Every mistake is a flashlight. It shows where systems, conversations, or decisions need strengthening. Lean in. Be curious. Build better.



Culture lives in rituals.

Intentional moments (onboarding, offboarding, grief, celebration) shape the DNA of an organization. Rituals are the architecture of belonging.



From Transition to Transformation

Leadership, Stability, and the Movement for Foster Youth

Experience of Thomas Lee, Chief Executive Officer at First Place for Youth

“Everyone has a role to play in ensuring foster care is just a season in a young person’s life. This is one of the few solvable problems in our society. We can ensure young people have housing, education, and a community that believes in them.”

Thomas Lee, Chief Executive Officer at First Place for Youth

At First Place for Youth, the mission is clear: to ensure foster youth have the opportunity to build the skills they need to make a successful transition to adulthood. With a vision rooted in equity, support, and belonging, First Place works to change the story for young people who age out of foster care each year in seven states — making sure this moment in their lives is a chapter, not the whole book.

The connection between First Place and Venture Leadership Collective (VLC) runs deep. In fact, First Place was VLC’s very first client. It was Sam Cobbs, then-CEO of First Place for Youth, who took a chance on VLC in its earliest days, offering them a one-year contract to help scale the organization to a new county. That leap of faith created a long-lasting partnership. Through First Place, VLC was reconnected to

Co-Principal, Andrew Niklaus, who previously worked for First Place for 6 years, and introduced to former VLC team member, Claudia Miller.

An urgent call from First Place’s Board of Directors and key funders in 2020, was a turning point. VLC supported a pivotal moment for First Place, as Aila, Andrew, and Claudia returned during a leadership transition to serve as interim CEO, CPO/COO, and CDO, respectively. VLC not only guided through a leadership vacuum, but also the tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic and the national racial reckoning sparked by the murder of George Floyd. During that time, foster youth were struggling — facing heightened mental health crises, housing and employment instability, and navigating vaccine mandates. The entire ecosystem, funders, staff, board, and young people, needed grounding.



"It was a privilege to be on the frontlines," Aila later shared. Together, she, Andrew, and Claudia didn't just hold space — they built capacity, stabilized the organization, and ensured that when the time came, they could responsibly step aside and leave First Place stronger than they found it.

The stabilization created the platform that Thomas Lee walked onto nearly four years ago, when he became CEO. He hadn't been looking for a new role — he was thriving where he was — but something about First Place pulled him in. "What sold me," he said, "was their national ambition, the strength of the team I'd inherit, and the incredible thinking already in the room that needed to be shared more boldly." That, and the quiet, powerful love for young people that permeated the organization, called him to finish a job he'd started years ago: helping foster youth thrive.

Still, Thomas knew he was entering a space that had endured leadership turbulence (three CEOs in four years) and where staff carried the weight of that instability. What made a successful handoff possible, what helped turn disruption into momentum, was the presence of VLC.

"I think people underestimate the value of interim leadership," Thomas reflected. "When you hear 'interim,' you might assume chaos or uncertainty, but VLC brought the opposite. They were a stabilizing force, especially for a team that had been through some leadership trauma. VLC created a bridge of trust and continuity so I could walk in with confidence and clarity."

Coming from the permanent CEO who followed, this reflection is a powerful testament to VLC's approach. Thomas didn't just inherit an organization — he

inherited an ecosystem that had been intentionally cultivated for stability, success, and deeper alignment. VLC didn't simply hold the space; they transformed it.

"The value of that transition work can't be overstated," Thomas noted. "It set the conditions around me so I could learn, assess, and ultimately do my best work on behalf of First Place."

VLC's impact extended beyond the CEO and CPO transitions. When the organization once again needed an interim development leader, VLC placed Claudia Miller back at First Place— who later stayed on permanently. "We're very much enmeshed in the VLC world," Thomas said, "and we're grateful for it."

As for his own leadership journey, Thomas shared a lesson that many leaders come to, but few speak aloud: "I wish I had led more like myself sooner. It's easy to think you need to prove yourself when stepping into a place that's been through upheaval. But the truth is, you already have what you need. You don't have to be the secret sauce. Just be yourself and trust that it's enough."

And when it comes to the work of supporting foster youth, Thomas offers a clear and urgent invitation: "Everyone has a role to play in ensuring foster care is just a season in a young person's life. This is one of the few solvable problems in our society. We can ensure young people have housing, education, and a community that believes in them. But only 24% of foster youth currently have that kind of support in place across the country. If you've been waiting for an invitation, come join the movement."

Visit [First Place for Youth.org](https://www.firstplaceforyouth.org) to learn more about their transformative work and how you can become a long-term believer in a better future for foster youth.

A North Star and a Rainbow

Always Dream's Journey with VLC

Experience of Kristi Yamaguchi, Founder of Always Dream and Nadyne Orona, Board Member

“My advice to other leaders? Be willing to be more aspirational. Be okay taking risks. When you’re uncomfortable, you’re growing.”

Kristi Yamaguchi, Founder of Always Dream

When Always Dream reached a pivotal moment in its growth, founder Kristi Yamaguchi and board member Nadyne Orona knew they needed more than just strategy—they needed clarity, courage, and a partner who could help them dream even bigger.

Enter Venture Leadership Collective.

“Kristi is my North Star,” said Nadyne. “And Aila was the Rainbow. From our very first meeting, she brought hope, ideas, and a deep sense of connection.”

It was 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, and Always Dream was seeking new leadership to guide the organization into its next chapter. Having been led for years by Kristi’s sister, Lori, the team was preparing to expand beyond its founder’s close-knit circle. For Kristi, it was a moment of deep reflection and release.

Always Dream is a nonprofit organization committed to

ensuring that every child has access to high-quality early literacy support and the tools to thrive. Through innovative programs that engage families and foster a lifelong love of reading, Always Dream empowers children from under-resourced communities to reach their full potential. With a focus on equity, family engagement, and early intervention, Always Dream is transforming home environments into rich learning spaces—one book, one child, and one dream at a time.

“It was the first time we looked outside of our core team for leadership,” Kristi said. “That alone was a huge shift. And the team we worked with at VLC made it feel not only possible, but exciting. They helped us define what we needed and who could help us reach higher.”

VLC introduced the “skyscraper model” to the team — a strategic tool to imagine how high Always



Dream could go, and what it would take to build there. That model, and the intentional guidance the team brought, led the organization to ask critical questions: Should we go deep or wide? Where can we have the greatest impact?

The clarity that followed helped Always Dream realign its geographic focus to California and Hawai'i and lay the groundwork for its most ambitious chapter yet: a five-year strategic plan to more than double the number of families served - from 5,400 to 10,000 by 2027.

But perhaps the most lasting impact of VLC's work wasn't just in the structure, it was in the storytelling. Kristi shared the story of Emilio, a young boy who entered their Always Reading program as a nonverbal preschooler. Through the support of his grandmother and the tools offered by the program, Emilio found his voice, asking questions, sharing thoughts, and eventually thriving in a mainstream kindergarten classroom.

"That story speaks to what this work is really about," Kristi said. "Our roles as caregivers, the power of literacy, and the importance of having the right partners in the right moments."

As Always Dream nears its 30th anniversary, Kristi and Nadyne both reflect on the importance of leadership that is both bold and reflective.

"My advice to other leaders?" Kristi said. "Be okay to be more aspirational. Be OK taking risks. When you're uncomfortable, you're growing."

"And don't shy away from conflict," added Nadyne. "Ask the hard questions. That's where transformation begins."

For a brief six months, VLC stepped into Always Dream's story — and left a legacy of strategy, clarity, and trust that continues to ripple forward.

To learn more and help Always Dream ensure that every child has the power of literacy to turn possibility into reality, visit [AlwaysDream.org](https://www.alwaysdream.org).

The Altitude We Gain Together

A Leader's Evolution Through VLC

Anastasia Mallillin, Deputy Director, UnCommon Law

“The work requires clarity, humility, and courage. But to really serve our clients well, it also demands something else: the ability to reflect in real time and ask, “Are we moving at the speed of trust?” Not just with our clients and partners, but with each other.”

Anastasia Mallillin, Deputy Director, UnCommon Law

Ten years ago, Venture Leadership Collective (VLC) was launched with a vision to walk alongside nonprofit leaders, not only when things were thriving, but especially when things felt uncertain. For me, that vision didn't just support my growth as a leader. It transformed how I lead, collaborate, and reflect.

My first encounter with VLC came during a leadership transition at Freedom Forward. Our executive director was stepping down, and VLC was brought in to support the interim placement process. Around the same time, Aila reached out and encouraged me to apply for Venture Leader Academy (VLA).

That moment — her seeing potential in me that I hadn't recognized myself — marked the start of a journey that would shape everything that followed.

VLA helps nonprofit professionals develop their executive leadership

knowledge, skills, and overall ability to advance their missions. By focusing on both the “micro”—the personal development—and the “macro”—the development of skills in all nonprofit domains—the Academy serves as a pathway for organizations to realize effective and diverse leaders.

VLA gave me the language, tools, and space to reframe my own leadership. I learned that being a number two, a strategic, steady, behind-the-scenes leader, may not always be flashy, but it's essential. It's where the glue lives. It's where systems are held together. And it's where I found my voice.

I walked away knowing not only that I had something to offer, but that I had already been offering it — quietly, consistently, effectively — all along. Before VLA, I often focused on execution — making things happen, keeping the



machine moving, holding things together behind the scenes. I did things with intention, but that intention wasn't always centered in how I defined leadership.

After VLA, I stepped into an interim executive placement at CROP through VLC, and ultimately stayed on to lead programming. What I learned through VLA and VLC challenged me to go deeper: not just how we do the work, but why and with whom and to what end. That shift toward alignment of values, people, and purpose now defines how I lead at UnCommon Law.

UnCommon Law's work supports people who are navigating both California's discretionary parole process and deep systems and environments of harm. The work requires clarity, humility, and courage. But to really serve our clients well, it also demands something else — the ability to reflect in real time and ask, "Are we moving at the speed of trust?" Not just with our clients and partners, but with each other.

VLC gave me both the tools and the permission to lead from my values and to bring my full self into the room. This work is difficult! And yet, with the support and foundation of VLC, I continue learning how to be soft and strategic, grounded and growing. This permission has stayed with me. I carry it into every meeting, every hard decision, every moment where it would be easier to default to urgency than to choose alignment.

The question I ask most often now is: Are we doing the work the right way, in service to the people we exist for? That instinct to lift up, to re-center, to pause and reflect, comes directly from my time with VLC. They taught me to ask: How do we gain altitude together?

Not just how do we move forward, but how do we rise?

There's a distinct quality to the way VLC works. A tenderness. A quiet dignity. They don't lead with ego. They lead with trust. And they expect the same in return. It's an invitation: to bring your full self. To lead with values. To let joy and celebration be part of the work, especially when things are hard.

If I could offer one message to leaders stepping into this work, it's this: trust yourself first. And trust yourself to be honest with yourself. To me, it's not just about believing I have the answers or that I'll get it all right. It's about trusting that I am committed to learning, to growing, and to getting better — in service of the mission and the team.

The speed of trust isn't just about others, it's about you. If you don't trust your own leadership, your own values, it's nearly impossible to build a community that does.

VLC didn't just shape my trajectory. They reminded me of who I am and helped me define who I want to be.

To Aila, to the VLC team, and to every leader who has walked through their doors: thank you. The altitude we gain together is the kind that lasts.

Visit CropOrganization.org and join the movement, transforming lives and creating pathways of opportunity for justice-involved individuals and take action with Uncommon Law using their guide to becoming an advocate for life-sentenced people at UncommonLaw.org.

Meeting at the Bridge

How VLC Helped The Imagine Bus Project Move Forward with Clarity, Courage, and Collaboration

Experience of Celia Tejada, former Board Chair, The Imagine Bus Project

Their advice to other boards in transition? “Come in clear-eyed. Stay focused on your purpose. And don’t be afraid to ask for help. VLC didn’t just get us through a tough moment, they made us better.”

Celia Tejada, former Board Chair, The Imagine Bus Project

When The Imagine Bus Project found itself at a crossroads — without an executive director and with a desire to recommit to its mission — the board didn’t just see a crisis. They saw a moment of possibility.

And thanks to a timely LinkedIn search and a bold leap of faith, they found their guide in Venture Leadership Collective (VLC).

“I remember plugging in ‘juvenile justice executives’ into LinkedIn,” recalled Maria Cristini, a board member at the time. “And Aila Malik’s biography popped up. I thought, ‘this person is perfect.’” What began as a search for leadership became one of VLC’s earliest consulting engagements. And, as Celia Tejada, former Board Chair noted, “The beauty of it was that we weren’t just hiring Aila, we were gaining an entire team.”

At its core, The Imagine Bus Project (TIBP), now a project of Success Centers, was founded

on the belief that the arts have the power to transform lives.

Through cross-cultural learning experiences rooted in relationship-building and creative expression, TIBP engaged youth impacted by the juvenile justice system, helping them envision and pursue fulfilling futures. Their programs promoted healthy self-expression, personal growth, and future orientation through the transformative power of art. The organization envisioned system-involved youth as capable of safe risk-taking, creative self-discovery, and long-term personal transformation — and believed that art could be the vehicle to break the cycle of incarceration.

But by the time VLC entered the picture, the organization had reached a critical inflection point. “We were coming out of a season that felt stale,” said Maria Cristini, a fellow board member. “We could see the opportunities, but we didn’t yet have the tools to act on them. VLC brought structure,



strategy, and a fresh point of view that changed everything. They weren't afraid to push us and we were ready for it."

With no Executive Director in place, the board had both the responsibility and the opportunity to make bold decisions. They welcomed the VLC team as thought partners, ready to examine the organization's structure, programs, and potential with fresh eyes. "VLC brought a dynamic point of view," Celia said. "And the team had the right expertise to put a framework around everything one ED alone couldn't manage. Our programs got stronger through the power of collaboration."

As the work progressed, so did the clarity. It eventually became clear that the most mission-aligned path forward was not to continue as a standalone organization but to merge into another nonprofit. It was a choice made not from a place of scarcity, but from vision and integrity. "The fact that we didn't have a sitting Executive Director helped," said Celia. "There was no one clinging to a title. As a board, we were open to what was best for the mission, and that openness allowed the programs to continue and, in some cases, even thrive."

Maria, who stepped into leadership during this transition, drew heavily on the support VLC had laid in place. "I didn't know how to run a nonprofit. I knew how to support leaders," she said. "There was a moment I needed to complete a grant narrative, and Aila wasn't even working with us anymore. But there she was at 6 a.m., helping me get it right. That kind of generosity, it was just incredible."

Beyond the logistics, both Maria and Celia spoke to something deeper: the emotional intelligence and values alignment VLC brought to their work. "VLC met us on the other side of the river," Celia said. "We had a vision, but we didn't know how to get there. Together, we built the bridge."

Their story is a reminder that sometimes, the most courageous thing a board can do is let go — of legacy structures, of ego, of fear — and prioritize impact. "People often ask me why more nonprofits don't merge," Maria reflected. "The truth is, they should. The efficiency and clarity that comes from a well-executed transition can be a gift to the mission."

Looking back, Maria and Celia see VLC's engagement not just as a solution to a leadership gap, but as a catalyst for reinvention. "VLC brought in the right people, had the humility to learn alongside us, and led with integrity," said Maria.

Their advice to other boards in transition? "Come in clear-eyed. Stay focused on your purpose. And don't be afraid to ask for help," said Celia. "VLC didn't just get us through a tough moment, they made us better."

As VLC celebrates ten years of walking alongside mission-driven organizations, Maria offered this reflection: "What VLC has built is incredibly impressive, not just the perspective and the strategy, but the people. The team lives their values. And when VLC steps in, the organization benefits. Every time."

Today, Success Centers continues to empower communities of color in San Francisco and Alameda County through education, employment, and the arts. Visit SuccessCenters.org to learn more and get inspired.

More Structure, More Freedom

A Culture Shift at Homeless Prenatal Program

Experience of Lilli Milton, Director of Programs for Homeless Prenatal Program

“Now, when stakeholders ask us to change our model or reporting, we can say no. We don’t need to be chameleons. We know our value. And we know our story.”

Lilli Milton, Director of Programs for Homeless Prenatal Program

When Lilli Milton first stepped into leadership at San Francisco’s Homeless Prenatal Program (HPP), she wasn’t thinking about logic models or impact frameworks. “I was one of those social workers who thought, ‘Data? Structure? That’s not for me.’ I was people and stories,” she laughs. “I didn’t see yet how structure could unlock the freedom we actually needed.”

Rooted in the belief that families can break the cycle of childhood poverty, HPP is a nationally recognized nonprofit that partners with families (particularly pregnant women experiencing homelessness or toxic stress) to build healthy, stable futures. Through a combination of housing support, prenatal and parenting services, economic mobility programs, and advocacy, HPP serves over 3,500 families each year. The organization is known for its integrated, family-centered

approach and its commitment to both direct service and systems change.

But as HPP expanded rapidly — serving more families, managing more contracts, and layering on more programs — it became clear that growth without grounding would lead to mission drift. What began as a deeply personal commitment to supporting pregnant people and families navigating poverty had evolved into a sprawling network of services, with limited infrastructure to sustain it.

Enter VLC.

Nine years ago, HPP engaged with the early VLC team to help translate its powerful, grassroots values, built over the past twenty five years of deeply listening to and serving their community, into a strategy that could hold the weight of the work and chart the course for the next decade. From



the very first meeting, something shifted.

"The VLC team saw us. That was the magic," Lilli recalls. "In such a short time, they reflected back a version of HPP that was both aspirational and completely recognizable. We weren't being told to become something else. We were being invited to more fully become ourselves."

That invitation wasn't always easy. Conversations about target populations and program definitions felt, at first, like a threat to the organization's identity. "We had always done so many things — parenting classes, computer labs, case management, sewing workshops. We were everything to everyone," she says. "So when VLC came in and said, 'You need to focus. You need a recipe,' half of us were ready. Half of us were not."

Today, HPP applies what it learned from VLC to every consultant engagement it undertakes. "We didn't know what good looked like before. Now we do," Lilli says. "We've internalized that bar, and we carry it with us."

But perhaps the most profound impact of HPP's relationship with VLC is the sense of agency it restored. In a system that often demands nonprofits contort themselves to fit funder needs, VLC helped HPP stay true to its own. "Now, when stakeholders ask us to change our model or reporting, we can say no," Lilli says. "We don't need to be chameleons. We know our value. And we know our story."

Looking back, Lilli sees VLC's work not just as consulting but as movement building.

"They've helped organizations like ours remember why we started. They've helped us lead with discipline and creativity, not fear. And they've shown the field what's possible when you're deeply seen, deeply challenged, and deeply believed in."

Join HPP's mission by volunteering, attending an event, subscribing to our newsletter or organizing a donation drive at HomelessPrenatal.org.



From Clarity to Impact

How VLC Helped Two Feathers Strengthen Systems and Center Youth

Experience of Virgil Moorehead, Executive Director of Two Feathers Native American Family Services

“What’s changed most is belief—in leadership, in the power of systems, and in the potential of our team. That clarity and belief has helped bring out the best in our staff and our kids.”

Virgil Moorehead, Executive Director of Two Feathers Native American Family Services

When Virgil Moorehead, Executive Director of Two Feathers Native American Family Services, was looking for a partner to help the organization become more data-driven and impact-oriented, his executive coach recommended Venture Leadership Collective (VLC). That introduction marked the beginning of a transformational partnership grounded in trust, clarity, and systems change.

“At the time, we had been trying to implement compliance and data tracking systems for three or four years,” Virgil recalls. “What VLC brought — through work on dashboards and Salesforce, and leadership coaching — finally gave us the structure and support we needed to get it done.”

Together, they built and refined a theory of change, reorganized the organizational chart, and created monthly dashboards that provided an accurate and real-time picture

of the organization’s outputs.

“Now, we know what programs we’re running, how we’re doing, and where we’re going,” says Virgil. “We have a map.”

The ripple effects went far beyond data. “What’s changed most is belief - in leadership, in the power of systems, and in the potential of our team,” Virgil shares. “That clarity and belief has helped bring out the best in our staff and our kids. We’re seeing more youth, seeing them for longer, and providing better support.”

One young person’s journey captures the impact best. She came to Two Feathers as a high school freshman, facing significant barriers: poverty, substance abuse, a family grieving the loss of a sibling. “She was in a tough place, angry, hurting, but she kept showing up,” Virgil remembers. Over the years, she engaged in therapy, received support, and eventually joined the organization’s



Youth Leadership team — the very department VLC supported most closely.

"Just this past summer, she helped lead our biggest cultural program, ACORN. She organized meals and prepared food for 75 to 100 kids over multiple months," Virgil shares. "To see her come out of her shell, lead with a positive attitude, and take pride in her work. That's what this is all about."

For Virgil, VLC stood out not just for what they built, but for how they built it. "We've spent a lot of money on evaluation that didn't get us where we needed to go. I fired two evaluators before we found VLC," he says. "They helped us become a truly data-driven organization. Now, I can see what's happening across the organization not in theory, but in practice."

That clarity fuels not only their clinical work, but their future vision. "We're urgently seeking long-term,

flexible funding for our youth employment programs, things not covered by federal or state grants: gas, food, case management, transportation," Virgil says. "Kids have real needs, and we want to meet all of them. VLC and the Vesper Foundation understand that. They've been the kind of intentional partners we need more of."

As Two Feathers continues to walk alongside Native youth and families, VLC's imprint is woven into the fabric of their work: belief in people, systems that uplift, and a shared commitment to impact that lasts.

Visit TwoFeathers-NAFS.org to learn how you can make a difference & join them on the mission to empower Native American youth and their families to achieve their full potential by offering culturally-affirming mental health and wellness programs in Humboldt County.

You Don't Know What You Don't Know

A Board Chair's Journey to Transformation with VLC

Jonathan Kotch, Board Chair, Family Connects International

One of my academic mentors once told me, “I wish I’d spent more time helping real people and less time on research.” That stuck with me. FCI was my opportunity to do something that mattered. I just had to be willing to grow and to lead.

Jonathan Kotch, Board Chair,
Family Connects International

Ten years ago, Venture Leadership Collective (VLC) was launched with a bold mission: to walk alongside nonprofit leaders at moments of inflection and opportunity, offering not just strategy, but solidarity. For me, that mission became personal.

When I became Chair of the Board at Family Connects International, I stepped into the role long before I was ready. We were floundering — clinging to goodwill and good intentions, but without the structure or leadership capacity to move forward. At first, I didn't think we needed help. After all, how hard could it be?

But as Valhalla Foundation, one of our funders, wisely pointed out: nonprofit leadership takes more than passion. It requires training, professional experience, and sometimes, outside eyes. That's when I was introduced to Aila and the team at VLC.

I wasn't eager to ask for help. It felt like an admission of failure. But I came to realize something foundational: you don't know what you don't know. We engaged Marsha, a VLC consultant, though even that process had its own awkward start. We gave her a staff title to help integrate her into the team, but the senior leadership found that relationship awkward. Her honest, unfiltered recommendations were not easy to hear.

But they were exactly what we needed.

VLC's organizational assessment and accompanying presentation were brutally clear. For the first time, we had an objective, professional diagnosis of what was holding us back. And yes — it made us look bad. Because we were in bad shape. And we needed to hear that.



What followed was a defining moment for me as a board leader. At a check-in meeting with our VLC team, we discussed whether to negotiate which recommendations to accept and which to ignore. Aila didn't flinch. She said, "If that's how you feel, we don't need to continue this relationship."

That's when I had to choose.

I chose VLC. I chose accountability. I chose the hard road.

The lessons I learned through that process are ones I hope every board chair hears loud and clear:

- Be open-minded.
- Drop your defenses.
- Listen. Reflect. And when the time comes—act.

Because of VLC, I had the knowledge, credibility, and motivation to lead through that moment. And with their guidance, we emerged stronger. We completed a national recruitment effort that brought in extraordinary new leadership. We diversified and professionalized our board. We got clearer about what success looks like — inside and out.

One of the most humbling realizations? Our staff was exceptional at the outward-facing work. They could inspire funders, tell a great story, and make the case. But inside the organization — relationships, operations, culture — we were struggling. Changes had to be made.

I came to this work late in my career. One of my academic mentors once told me, "I wish I'd spent more time helping real people and less time on research." That stuck with me. FCI was my opportunity to do something that mattered. I just had to be willing to grow and to lead.

VLC didn't just help our organization. They changed how I think about leadership. About service. About humility. It's not easy to look in the mirror. But it's the first step to real change.

To everyone who's part of this ten-year journey: thank you. You're not just building stronger nonprofits. You're building better leaders.

FCI is transforming lives, strengthening families, and building healthier communities. Explore how you can support or get in touch to bring Family Connects to your community at FamilyConnects.org.

Walking Beside Us Every Step of the Way

How VLC Helped MENTOR Launch a Movement in California

Experience of Joellen Spacek, Senior Director of Affiliate Impact, and Jessica Silverman, Affiliate Expansion Director, MENTOR

“The power of positive energy — not toxic positivity, but a true can-do attitude — has made a huge difference. To have a partner at your back with the skillset and mindset to get things done, that’s invaluable.”

Jessica Silverman, MENTOR’s Affiliate Expansion Director

At its core, MENTOR believes that relationships are foundational to young people’s growth, learning, and success.

As the unifying champion for quality youth mentoring in the United States, MENTOR works to close the mentoring gap, expand opportunities, and integrate mentoring into critical systems — education, workforce, juvenile justice, and more. Through a network of affiliates across the country, MENTOR advances its mission locally by building capacity and catalyzing collaboration in communities.

That vision came to life in California in a powerful way, thanks in large part to a partnership with Venture Leadership Collective (VLC). When MENTOR was looking to grow its presence on the ground, particularly in key regions where they needed support with board development, fundraising

cultivation, and strategic planning, VLC proved to be the right match. “We knew we had the momentum, but we needed a partner who could help us operationalize our growth,” shared Joellen Spacek, Senior Director of Affiliate Impact. “That’s exactly what VLC delivered.”

VLC team members David Cattivera and Joe Herrity conducted regional feasibility studies, engaged potential funders, helped establish local leadership councils, and laid the groundwork for what would eventually become MENTOR California. From the outset, their role extended beyond traditional consulting. They became trusted co-strategists — embedded collaborators who, over time, felt like an extension of the MENTOR team.

“VLC helped us move from intention to execution,” said



Jessica Silverman, MENTOR's Affiliate Expansion Director, recalling the launch of MENTOR California. "They made the path forward feel not only possible, but exciting." Their guidance was especially pivotal in 2020, when MENTOR California launched amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of VLC's groundwork — helping to build a strong board, establishing authentic community partnerships, and providing clear strategic direction — the affiliate was equipped to weather early challenges and gain a solid foothold.

Today, MENTOR California is catalyzing transformational change across the state: embedding mentoring in school districts, partnering with professional sports teams like the Golden State Warriors, and redefining mentoring not just as a program, but as a strategy for equity.

A significant part of that success stemmed from recruiting the right leadership. VLC helped identify Marcus Strother as the founding Executive Director — an educator and former school administrator who brought "both the heart and the hustle," according to MENTOR, and was uniquely suited to lead with entrepreneurial energy and a deep commitment to youth development. "Getting the right people into the right roles is everything," Joellen emphasized. "Marcus was exactly who we needed, and VLC helped us find him."

That same discernment led to the recruitment of Stephen Minix, Vice President of Community at UpMetrics, as board chair of MENTOR California — an appointment that would soon benefit not just the local Affiliate but MENTOR's national network. "He's one of those rockstars you hope to meet in this work," said Jessica. "VLC introduced us, and he's become essential to our California team and the national MENTOR community."

Together, MENTOR and VLC have also helped shape broader Affiliate strategy — drawing lessons from California to inform national growth. From rethinking how to build representative boards, to engaging funders early, to ensuring community voice is central in all planning, the work has evolved through shared learning. "We're always in a frame of learning, and we learn with VLC," Jessica reflected. "We brainstorm, we talk through challenges, we celebrate wins together. The relationship is built on trust, mutual respect, and a shared belief in what's possible."

When asked if there's anything left to say, Joellen smiled: "Meeting Aila is still on my bucket list. But honestly, when I think about VLC, I think about people who care deeply, who listen well, and who walk alongside their clients with purpose and heart. That's the kind of partner you don't just want — you need."

Take action at [Mentoring.org](https://mentoring.org) by becoming a mentor and learning how you can advocate for policies and funding that close the mentor gap.



We Can Do This

How VLC Helped Teen Lifeline Shift from Crisis Response to Systems Change

Experience of Michelle Moorhead, Executive Director of Teen Lifeline

You're never too old to keep learning. As a leader, the work is hard. There's never enough money. The pressure to raise funds is constant. But if you don't allow yourself to be inspired, it gets even harder.

Michelle Moorhead, Executive Director of Teen Lifeline

When Michelle Moorhead, Executive Director of Teen Lifeline, raised her hand at a nonprofit conference, she wasn't expecting to find a long-term thought partner. But as she listened to Aila speak about measuring nonprofit impact, she asked a question that had been weighing on her for years: "How do you measure something that never happened?" The prevention of suicide — how do you prove that?

That question became the beginning of an eight-year relationship between Teen Lifeline and Venture Leadership Collective (VLC), one that helped reshape not just how the organization defined success, but how it envisioned its role in the broader ecosystem of youth mental health.

Founded in 1986, Teen Lifeline is a nonprofit dedicated to preventing teen suicide in Arizona by enhancing resiliency in youth and

fostering supportive communities. Best known for its 24/7 peer-to-peer crisis hotline, Teen Lifeline trains teen volunteers to provide free, confidential support to their peers. But the organization is more than a crisis response line, it also delivers prevention education, outreach in schools, and community engagement programming that connects youth with the tools, skills, and relationships they need to survive and thrive.

After connecting with Aila, Michelle spent over a year convincing her board to invest in a Theory of Change engagement. "I believed in what she was saying so much," Michelle said. "Aila makes you believe you can do it. She empowers you before the work even begins."

VLC worked closely with Teen Lifeline to clarify their mission, outcomes, and impact model. What emerged was a powerful



reframe: rather than measuring suicide prevention only in terms of crisis intervention, Teen Lifeline could begin to focus on protective factors — the upstream indicators that give young people the tools to live and lead with resilience. “Instead of focusing on lives lost,” Michelle said, “we began to focus on whether kids felt connected, hopeful, and prepared for their future.”

Andrew Lopez, a VLC team member based in Arizona, played a pivotal role in helping Teen Lifeline refine their measurement systems and shift their thinking. “He helped us look at prevention like a river,” Michelle explained. “Suicide is the waterfall at the end. But you can prevent tragedy anywhere along the stream by creating connections, building coping skills, and making sure kids know where to turn for help.”

This shift wasn’t just theoretical—it fundamentally changed the organization. Their mission statement was updated to include “fostering supportive communities,” a reflection of their growing recognition that no hotline alone can meet every need. They began measuring not just who called, but how their work showed up in schools, with volunteers, and across systems. “Teachers started telling us their students were saying, ‘I knew what to do because the hotline was on my ID card,’” Michelle recalled.

The clarity created through their Theory of Change didn’t just strengthen programming, it paved the way for bold strategic growth. For years, Michelle had dreamed of expanding Teen Lifeline’s services to Tucson. But the board was hesitant, until VLC led a

retreat and helped them see the opportunity with fresh eyes. “Because they’re an outside voice, the team helped the board believe we could do this,” Michelle said. “Tucson would never have been an option if we hadn’t done Theory of Change. And now we’re a year and a half into the expansion, and it’s going so well.”

VLC continues to lead Teen Lifeline’s annual board retreats, and their influence is visible in every meeting. “VLC helped us change how we show up as a board,” Michelle said. “We have business up front, but we also ask generative questions that invite conversation and ownership. It’s helped our board feel not just informed, but empowered.”

For Michelle, VLC’s power is rooted in the people. “They make you believe you can do something, even when it seems hard. Like measuring prevention, or expanding to a new city. Instead of focusing on what we can’t do, VLC helped us ask: What if we could?”

Advice for Other Leaders in the Field: “You’re never too old to keep learning,” Michelle said. “As a leader, the work is hard. There’s never enough money. The pressure to raise funds is constant. But if you don’t allow yourself to be inspired, it gets even harder. You have to be willing to see things in a new way — and to say, we can do this.”

Learn more about Teen Lifeline’s hotline, prevention education, and community outreach programs and learn how you can support teens in crisis at [TeenLifeline.org](https://teenlifeline.org).

Navigating Transition, Finding Momentum

Bringing Fresh Eyes from VLC to The Neurodiversity Alliance

Experience of Dave Flink, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Neurodiversity Alliance

“At first, the goal was straightforward: keep operations steady until a permanent hire could be made; “make sure no extra water got in the boat,”... But what happened next exceeded every expectation...”

Dave Flink, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Neurodiversity Alliance

For more than two decades, the Neurodiversity Alliance — founded and led by David Flink — has championed a simple but powerful belief: that every neurodiverse young person deserves to be seen, heard, and valued for who they are. Born from the lived experiences of students with learning differences, the organization is distinctive in its approach, working directly with young people to lift up their voices, stories, and leadership in the broader movement for educational equity.

For years, Flink had heard colleagues talk about their positive experiences with the Venture Leadership Collective (VLC). “Different folks had mentioned their great experiences,” he remembers, “but there hadn’t been an urgent need to tap into those services, though I kept them in the back of my mind.” That moment came when a senior staff

member announced they were leaving during a period of rapid organizational expansion.

Knowing how critical the transition would be, Flink reached out to VLC’s David Cattivera. The response was immediate and thoughtful. Cattivera took time to understand exactly what the organization needed, asking clarifying questions before suggesting possible fits. Within days, Flink was connected to Gary Chapman, who would become an indispensable partner.

At first, the goal was straightforward: keep operations steady until a permanent hire could be made; “make sure no extra water got in the boat,” as Flink put it. But what happened next exceeded every expectation.

“Instead of it just being okay or a placeholder,” Flink recalls, “Gary put wind in our sails.”



Gary quickly became embedded in the team, not only facilitating the transfer of critical institutional knowledge from the departing staff member but also shoring up loose ends the organization didn't realize existed. He brought fresh ideas, new systems, and the benefit of having worked inside many different organizations — perspective that only comes from broad, hands-on experience.

By the end of the engagement, Gary had positioned the Neurodiversity Alliance to fully capitalize on its growth, helped chart the next course of action, and ensured his eventual replacement was set up for success. "Once we were ready, he didn't just walk away," Flink says. "He helped us find his replacement and translated all that knowledge, along with the new

ideas he brought, to the person we hired."

Today, the Neurodiversity Alliance continues to thrive, with the benefits of that critical partnership still evident. Gary remains an ally and thought partner, and VLC remains at the top of Flink's list for when — not if — the next big transition comes.

For VLC, this is the work: not just steadying the ship, but helping mission-driven organizations like the Neurodiversity Alliance find their course, harness the wind, and sail faster toward the future they're building.

Visit TheNDAalliance.org to join the largest online community and national network of neurodiversity clubs in the country.

Precious Liminal Space

How VLC Supported SV2 Through Leadership Transition

Experience of Jody Chang, Director of Operations at Silicon Valley Social Venture Fund

“Small to midsize nonprofits often think, ‘We don’t have the budget for an interim leader.’ But what if that transition is actually the best time to invest in the health of your organization?”

Jody Chang, Director of Operations at SV2

For Jody Chang, a longtime staff member at Silicon Valley Social Venture Fund (SV2), the value of Venture Leadership Collective (VLC) revealed itself during one of the most vulnerable and formative seasons in an organization’s life: the search for a new CEO. The search for a new executive represented a key growth moment for SV2, as the organization was ready to live more fully into an equity commitment. But as Jody puts it, “Transitions are vulnerable times — not just for people, but for organizations. And yet, they can also be times of restoration, growth, and preparation for the future.”

SV2 is a nonprofit that brings together donors, social change leaders, and community-based organizations to accelerate meaningful impact in the Bay Area and beyond. Through a model of engaged philanthropy, SV2 Donor Partners collaborate with and

learn from nonprofit and social enterprise leaders, providing unrestricted funding, strategic support, and capacity-building resources. With equity and community voice at the center, SV2’s mission is to build a more just and sustainable world — and to do it in partnership.

That spirit of partnership made VLC a natural fit. Even before joining VLC, Andrew Niklaus had worked closely with SV2 on a project to define and refine how the organization measures its impact on grantees. “It’s not surprising he’s at VLC,” Jody reflected. “That thoughtful approach to organizational capacity-building is a hallmark of their work.” Andrew’s engagement helped SV2 navigate a tricky but vital question for funders: How can we measure our contribution to impact without overstating it? “We still use the framework he helped us build,” Jody noted. “It brought clarity to where, why,



and when we invest. What had been intuitive became intentional."

The organization's first formal engagement with VLC came when the board brought on Dave Cattivera as interim CEO during the search for permanent leadership. For Jody, hiring a professional interim CEO was an inspired choice. "It was a wonderful decision," she said. "We were Zoom-fatigued at the start of the COVID crisis and navigating major internal shifts. Dave came in with warmth, wisdom, and the ability to listen deeply."

His leadership wasn't loud or directive. It was steady, intuitive, and deeply respectful. "He was an incredibly healing presence for our whole team," Jody recalled. "He created this precious, liminal space where we could breathe, process where we'd been, and begin to envision where we wanted to go." That space wasn't just emotional — it was practical, too. One of Dave's board-mandated tasks was to conduct an organizational assessment — a process which brought helpful insights to inform SV2's next season. When SV2 hired David Onek as the new CEO, he initiated strategic planning and implemented significant equity commitments, including bringing community leaders onto the SV2 Board and centering community voice

in SV2's grant decisions. Looking back, Jody sees the throughlines to Dave's interim leadership. "By offering a stabilizing, practical, and deeply empathetic presence during an interim period, Dave built our organizational capacity," Jody emphasized. "That was an investment in our future."

VLC's impact, she reflected, is a powerful reminder that leadership transitions don't have to be chaotic or transactional. With the right support, they can be opportunities for recalibration, learning, and growth. "Small to midsize nonprofits often think, 'We don't have the budget for an interim leader,'" she said. "But what if that transition is actually the best time to invest in the health of your organization? Dave helped ensure our new CEO inherited a stable, healing organization. That's priceless."

Looking back, Jody sees VLC's values as closely aligned with the best of the social sector: humility, clarity, deep listening, and joy. "They bring strategy and soul," she said. "Their work is not just technically sound — it's emotionally intelligent. And that's what so many of us need in moments of change."

Learn more about SV2's mission and impact at [SV2.org](https://sv2.org) — explore inspiring stories, fresh insights, and ways you can make a difference.



Vision, Values & Balance

Collaborating with Project Evident to Scale Juma's Model with Integrity and Intention

Experience of Adriane Gamble Armstrong, Senior Advisor (& Former CEO), Juma

“When things are good, I invest in sustainable efforts. When things are tough, I resist cutting too deep, because there will be an upswing and I want us to be ready for it. That’s the long view I try to hold.”

Adriane Gamble Armstrong,
Senior Advisor (& Former CEO
of 8 years), Juma

When Adriane Gamble Armstrong, CEO of Juma, set out to refine the organization’s next chapter, she knew it would require both deep reflection and bold planning. Juma, a social enterprise that has provided employment, job skills training, financial guidance, mentorship, and career exploration to more than 4,000 young people during Adriane’s tenure, was at an inflection point. Many of Juma’s youth come from low-income households, have experienced homelessness or foster care, or carry the weight of justice system involvement. For Adriane, the stakes could not have been higher: how could Juma ensure its proven model not only endured but also expanded responsibly, with impact that could be measured and sustained?

It was through a recommendation from her colleagues at the GreenLight Fund that Adriane connected with the Venture

Leadership Collective team. Juma was already working with Project Evident to refine its theory of change and strengthen its evidence base. Adriane saw an opportunity: what if VLC and Project Evident could coordinate, weaving together evidence-building with a clear strategy for scale?

The result was a truly unique and collaborative process. With Project Evident, Juma codified its theory of change and built the foundation for rigorous impact evaluation. With VLC, Juma took a hard look at its past efforts to expand between 2011 and 2016 — what worked, what didn’t, and why. Together, they created criteria for future expansion and developed an assessment tool to evaluate new markets with both quantitative data and lived lessons. It was a process that balanced vision with discipline, ambition with pragmatism.



"Through this work with VLC, we were able to deeply reflect on our prior scaling phase and take away clear, hard-won lessons," Adriane reflected. "That strategy not only gave us the confidence to move forward but also helped us secure a large unrestricted gift that validated our direction."

Adriane remains steadfast in her belief that Juma's greatest strength lies in its young people. "People say we're giving youth an opportunity. The truth is, we are the lucky ones. Our young people are so gifted, so strong, so smart, and they make Juma what it is. Any employer who gets to hire them is fortunate. Their ability to navigate uncertainty is a strength, especially in times like these."

Looking back, Adriane also offers wisdom for other leaders navigating cycles of growth and contraction.

"I've seen these cycles throughout my career. When things are good, I invest in sustainable efforts. When things are tough, I resist cutting too deep, because there will be an upswing and I want us to be ready for it. That's the long view I try to hold."

For Adriane and Juma, partnering with VLC wasn't just about a strategy document — it was about building the tools, perspective, and resilience to carry their mission forward. It's a story that embodies VLC's ethos: leadership that learns from the past, invests in the future, and never loses sight of the people at the heart of the work.

Dive into real stories, explore their programs, and find your way to help build brighter futures today at [Juma.org](https://www.juma.org).

Finding My Footing

The Magic of VLC's Holistic Approach with East Bay Agency for Children

Experience of Tammy Jones, Chief Operating Officer, East Bay Agency for Children

“...When an interim moment arrives, treat it as an opportunity: time to strengthen culture, improve finances, and make changes long deferred.”

Tammy Jones, Chief Operating Officer, East Bay Agency for Children

East Bay Agency for Children (EBAC) partners with schools, families, and communities to advance children's mental health, family resilience, and educational equity. Its mission — trauma-informed mental health care, family support, and school-based services — points to a clear vision: an East Bay where every child is safe, supported, and thriving in school and in life.

That mission framed EBAC's first engagement with Venture Leadership Collective (VLC). After years of handling strategic planning in-house, EBAC invited an external perspective. VLC arrived with a wider lens and disciplined process, helping the team sharpen who they are, who they serve, and where they must focus to make “thriving” tangible. As Tammy Jones, Chief Operating Officer at EBAC, recalls it, “magic happened” in the form of a series of clarifying moments where

the organization's identity and direction clicked into place.

When leadership changes followed, VLC moved from planning partner to steadying force for 3+ years. VLC Team members Vamsey Palagummi and Andrew Lopez stepped into interim roles that were tailored to support Theory of Change implementation. They provided interim leadership support for the Chief Program Officer and Director of Continuous Quality Improvement roles, supported database selection process and implementation, facilitated candid employee feedback, created space to revisit policies, practices, and decision rights, and even led the search and onboarding process for their permanent staff replacement. The work strengthened culture and tightened operations so EBAC's trauma-informed services could scale with integrity.

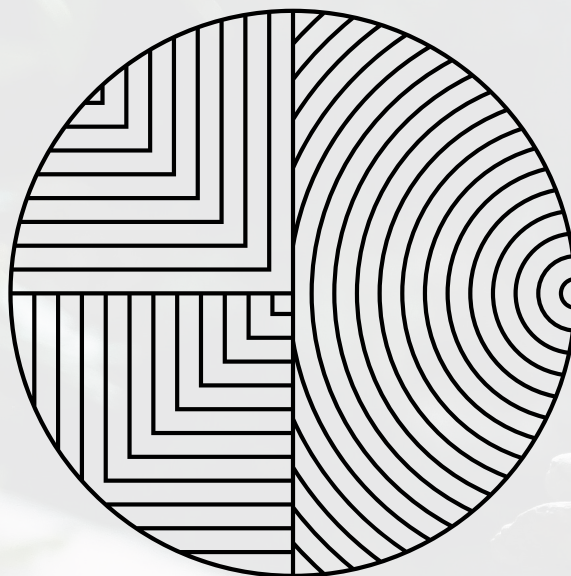


Tammy later joined VLC's Venture Leadership Academy (VLA), where a key concept — the executive generalist — reshaped how she held her role: seeing the whole system while diving into the weeds when needed. VLA blended inner work (values, identity, presence) with practical management (reading budgets for insight, demystifying development and finance, managing complexity across school-based programs). As a leader of color, Tammy surfaced the question of access; how to enter the rooms where resources are shaped and how to navigate the imposter syndrome that can shadow that path. VLA named those dynamics, normalized them, and built the skills to move through them. The cohort relationships became a durable circle of practice, one that she continues to be a part of to this day.

Her guidance to other “number twos” is simple: step out to step up. The investment returns quickly, in sharper tools, stronger conviction, and a supportive peer network. And when an interim moment arrives, treat it as an opportunity: time to strengthen culture, improve finances, and make changes long deferred. With a knowledgeable partner like VLC, those openings become turning points — for leaders, and for the children and families EBAC exists to serve.

VLC's partnership with EBAC continues today with Venture Leader Maya Smith serving in an interim Strategic Development and Communications role.

To learn more about EBAC's mission to bring hope for a brighter future to children impacted by trauma and social inequity, visit EBAC.org.



Venture Leadership Collective
VentureLeader.org