



# The New Little Rascals? Forming Multi-Sector Learning Gangs<sup>☆</sup>



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In 1922, the movie producer Hal Roach began a series of silent short films, which in 1929 became “talkies.” The films featured a group of neighborhood kids called *Our Gang* (also known as *The Little Rascals*). Progressive for its time, the films showed children of all types—girls and boys, blacks and whites—getting into mischief and perhaps even learning from each other.

Maybe the times are right for another type of gang that mixes different groups of people and gets into a new kind of mischief?

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*Being with this group, getting the ideas and inspiration I do, is magic.*

School Superintendent and member of The Hard Rock Miners

When a sheriff, a football coach, a dancer and software firm chief executive officer (CEO) sit down at a table together, what on earth do they talk about? More than you might expect. We have been forming and facilitating multi-sector learning “gangs” for several years and see first-hand how they’ve become a source for innovation and connection for individuals, organizations and communities. Particularly in a knowledge economy, successful leaders are always searching for new ideas and ways to solve problems. If they have leveraged the knowledge and connections within their own industries, some look beyond their fields for inspiration. As a CEO and gang member who sold his firm to Microsoft says, “Once best practices in your field are documented, they become normal practices. You have to go outside your field to find new ideas.”

The idea of multi-sector learning gangs is simple—bring together smart people from diverse fields, let them learn from each other, and see what connections and innovations come out. Oddly, though, we have found few other groups like these gangs, whose main purpose is learning and problem solving. Clearly, groups that bring peers together do exist (e.g., industry CEO councils, Young Presidents Organization, MasterMind groups) but they have qualities that are different from learning gangs. Often, they are fee-based and comprise people from a common sector (e.g., from business, from government, from the arts), rather than singular representation, across sectors. Usually a facilitator guides the discussion in certain, often predefined realms (e.g., a personal problem, a professional problem), rather than supporting the group’s choice of what to cover and how to operate. Some groups have a focus on networking and lead generation, which again, is not the focus of learning gangs.

While all of these types of organizations clearly have value, we believe that learning gangs provide an unusual—and positive—alternative role: a group that offers an informal, but facilitator supported, learning environment that inspires members to learn, grow, and innovate. Indeed, we find these gang members are aggressive in their attitudes toward learning, similar to what the Center for Creative Leadership calls “agile learners.” Their characteristics include, for instance, being willing and assertive about trying something new, focusing on using that “something new” to improve performance (their own and their organization’s), being reflective, taking risks, and being nondefensive in their approach toward improvement and learning. While we’ve not been able to measure these characteristics in a quantitative way, our qualitative assessment found that the best members are those who are serious about wanting to learn and improve, who are high output/low ego type of people, and who are deliberately matched for compatibility with others in their learning group.

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In this paper, we'll tell the story of the learning gangs we started in Boise, Idaho, but have the potential to spread far beyond. We'll talk about what learning gangs are, who joins them and why. And then, we'll offer suggestions about how to start your own gang, based on the lessons we've learned and earned in forming, facilitating, and generating benefits from these groups—for the individual gang members, their organizations, and their broader communities.

## WHAT ARE LEARNING GANGS?

Imagine joining a group of people who seek out new ideas, constantly ask questions to gain knowledge so they or their organizations can improve, and freely offer ideas about how to solve messy problems you or your organization might have, but who have no stake or ego tied up in whether or how you deal with those problems. Imagine having a time set aside specifically for learning and reflecting as a way to invigorate your mind. Now imagine that you do this while you are sitting next to a coach, a sheriff or an actor. That's what our gang members do, month after month.

The original gang started in 2006 with four high-performing, highly creative organizations in Boise, Idaho, one of the most remote urban areas in the continental USA. The Gang now includes eight organizations, from sectors that range from university sports to business, from the arts to law enforcement. In addition, we have created another five gangs in Boise and are supporting others that are starting up in Texas and Australia.

Like many good ideas, the original gang was unplanned, unexpected and organic. While one of us was conducting research to learn about whether and how diverse organizations use creativity in their management and leadership practices, she sought out organizations that seemed to be as dissimilar as imaginable (a football program, a software firm, a theater company, and a health information organization). She suspected and expected they would have very different approaches to creativity, if they had any creativity at all. How wrong she was.

She chose the organizations partly by accident and then by design, when it became clear that the organizations were all high performing (measured objectively in their fields) and highly creative (based on recognition from others). The four original organizations included:

- Boise State University's football program, which has consistently ranked in the top 25 Division I American university programs, despite having a budget far less than most competitors, and despite being outside of the Bowl Championship Series. As one reporter noted years ago, the entire program's budget was less than the salary of the head coach of Oklahoma University, which Boise defeated in a now famous nail biter game (Fiesta Bowl, 2007).
- The Idaho Shakespeare Festival, in partnership with the Great Lakes Theatre of Cleveland, which developed a new business model for regional theater that is so unusual, and successful that Yale Drama School wrote a case study about it.
- ProClarity, a small business intelligence analytics software firm, which developed a new way of visually presenting

data that surpassed others in the industry. The firm also found a way to build market share against the giants in the field, and then one of those giants (Microsoft) bought the firm. The founder/CEO has since gone on to start another new venture, WhiteCloud Analytics, which has grown from 2 to 30 people in three years.

- Healthwise, a health information not-for-profit organization, which provides all of the content for WebMD and serves huge insurance and hospital institutions in the U.S. and abroad. It also won an award for being designated one of the *Wall Street Journal's* best small firms to work for.

As the investigation into creativity within these diverse groups unfolded, it became clear that the organizations had more in common in how they do things differently to get better than anyone expected—from how they hired people and generated ideas, to what types of leaders they developed and how they built cultures that support creativity.

In the process of that early investigation (2005–2006), Nancy played “shuttle diplomat,” going from organization to organization, reporting lessons from each group to the leaders in the other organizations. After almost a year, the head coach of the football program asked whether the whole group could get together. He wanted to meet the CEOs and directors of the other organizations who were doing interesting things. He also wanted his coaches and to meet actors and engineers, people they never would normally encounter. The first meeting in 2006 included about 30 people—the leaders plus four to eight people from each organization. The football coach invited all of his nine assistant coaches.

The original Gang (of Four) was born.

Over the years, that Gang expanded to include eight organizations: the original four plus more highly creative, high performing members. The more recent members include:

- Trey McIntyre Project, the full time dance company of a world-renowned choreographer who chose to locate in Boise, Idaho, over culture centers like San Francisco and New York City.
- Ada County Sheriff's Office, which increasingly offers training and consulting to other jails and police departments nationwide based on their innovative approach.
- Drake Cooper, a marketing/advertising firm that receives more awards per capita than others in region and was just chosen by *Outside Magazine* as one of the best places to work in the U.S.
- Bishop Kelly High School, a high-performing local parochial school with a former technology executive as president.

The leaders meet regularly for a “Gang Messy (Problem) Breakfast” to learn from each other and to discuss messy problems their organizations and the community may face. The group has continued to hold an Annual Gang Meeting with 50–60 people attending from across the member organizations. Learning and sharing ideas is the purpose of these gatherings, not to achieve a specific goal, not to network and not to generate business. Sometimes those outcomes happen, and, in fact, some of the organizations do work together,

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