



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: PHASE 1 FINDINGS | APRIL 2026

Boettcher Foundation

BACKGROUND

Leadership in Colorado is at a pivotal moment, defined by increasing complexity and significant opportunity. Communities across the state are navigating rapid change, resource constraints, and growing polarization. These conditions highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how leadership is functioning, and where it must evolve, to meet the state's most pressing challenges.

The *State of Leadership* is the Boettcher Foundation's multi-year initiative to better understand, strengthen, and connect Colorado's leadership ecosystem. Building on Boettcher's longstanding investment in leadership development, and in partnership with White River Strategy and Effect X LLC, the first year has focused on listening, learning, and relationship-building across the state. These efforts have generated core findings and additional insights that will inform the initiative's next phase.

Consistent with Boettcher's approach, leadership is defined not by title or position, but as the act of mobilizing people to address complex challenges and strengthen communities. This perspective recognizes leadership as broadly accessible and inherently relational, an activity that depends on how individuals engage with one another and their communities.

The initiative is grounded in a simple but ambitious goal: to understand what leaders across Colorado are experiencing, and to translate those perspectives into shared strategies and future investments. Through this work, we are identifying emerging trends, surfacing opportunity gaps, and building a clearer picture of how leadership is evolving across regions, sectors, and communities statewide.



BIG PICTURE LEARNING

The initial phase was designed to explore and distill a high-level understanding of Colorado's leadership ecosystem. To do this, we engaged 1,024 Coloradans through 25 convenings and 48 discussions held across the state from February through December of 2025. Participants represented all 64 counties and reflected broad diversity in age, ethnicity, geography, and influence across 14 sectors. This broad engagement was critical. As we learned, in an interconnected, complex state with diverse industries and geographies, effective collaboration requires understanding the various ecosystem components (people, organizations, resources, and needs) and how these leadership elements shape the whole.

Colorado's leadership ecosystem is under significant strain marked by complexity, burnout, resource gaps, and polarization. Still, it remains deeply resilient and relationship-driven. Strengthening the ecosystem will require greater investment in people and connections, and intentional efforts to activate new leaders across regions and sectors.

FINDINGS

The Need for Ecosystem Thinking In a Time of Complex Pressures

Across all regions and sectors, leaders described a strikingly consistent experience: feeling stretched thin, overwhelmed, and nearing burnout amid sustained upheaval and growing complexity. Several participants characterized their state as one of "constant crisis."

To navigate this environment, one finding is the need for "ecosystem thinking." This recognizes the state's leadership landscape as an interconnected system, one where people, organizations, resources, and challenges are constantly interacting. It requires leaders to move beyond isolated solutions and instead understand, navigate, and strengthen the relationships and dynamics that shape the whole. This approach complements established leadership frameworks, encouraging individuals to rethink traditional values such as efficiency and consistency, and to recognize when more nuanced and innovative responses are needed alongside (or instead of) conventional tools like strategic planning and SMART goals.

***Takeaway:** Leaders are stretched thin and navigating constant complexity. Innovative ecosystem thinking is critical because traditional approaches aren't enough.*

Leadership Qualities

Leadership effectiveness is very broadly understood as being deeply tied to intangible inner qualities such as engagement, resilience, dedication, and self-awareness. Furthermore, across sectors and regions, participants emphasized that how leaders "show up" in relationships is a profoundly important aspect of leadership — qualities referenced about 6 times more frequently than others.

***Takeaway:** Leadership is less about title or position and more about how individuals show up. Resilience, self-awareness, and relationships are what matter most.*

Silos & Collaboration

Contrary to common assumptions, leaders are not siloed primarily by sector. On average, participants reported influence across more than two issue areas, and nearly half reported influence across more than one legal sector (e.g., nonprofit and business). This suggests that silos are less about the experience of individuals and more about structural and cultural dynamics that reinforce isolating 'siloed' approaches. Thus, addressing silos requires systemic solutions that are more complex than cross-sector relationships.

Resources

The need for increased resources, particularly financial, was the most frequently cited leadership need by a large margin. Within that common theme, two interesting differences emerged:

- **Rural leaders** often reframed this need through the lens of “resourcefulness,” emphasizing adaptability and creative problem-solving in the face of scarcity. This scarcity is compounded by the small number of people — a purely numeric reality which on average makes leadership burdens approximately four times heavier in rural communities.
- **Urban leaders**, especially in Denver, had a surprisingly different theme: while the Front Range receives more funding, urban leaders actually expressed more strain around lack of resources than their rural peers. Two events indicated a statistically significant LOWER access to resources: (1) The Colorado Nonprofit Association Denver conference and (2) Philanthropy Colorado. While not reported directly, this stress is likely related to the substantial gap between the massive scale of urban need and limited resources.

Leadership Capacity & Succession

In rural communities, leaders frequently described the “Same 10 People” problem — where a small number of individuals carry a disproportionate share of civic and nonprofit leadership roles. The need for more people to be engaged in leadership was further echoed in discussions across regions where participants highlighted a pressing need for improved succession planning and recruitment into leadership roles.

The fascinating recommended response that emerged is a flexible, individualized “Leadership Activation” approach that provides the encouragement, pathways, and resources needed to move willing individuals from the sidelines into active leadership.

Relationships & Polarization

Leaders across the state reported that increasing polarization is placing significant strain on relationships, contributing to burnout and risk of turnover in critical services.

At the same time, many leaders are intentionally engaging in deep listening across differences and forming strong, values-aligned teams as a proactive response to polarization.

Takeaway: Polarization is putting pressure on relationships, but leaders are responding by leaning into trust and connection. Too few people are carrying too much leadership responsibility. Activating new leaders is a major opportunity.

Significance of Geography

Geography emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping Colorado's leadership ecosystems. While the Front Range versus the rest of the state was a common theme, participants also emphasized meaningful distinctions within regions — such as regional cities (e.g., Durango) versus surrounding towns and dryland farming communities versus irrigated regions.

These geographic realities significantly affect relationships, resource availability, and leadership dynamics.

Takeaway: Where you are shapes everything, from resources and relationships to challenges and opportunities. Solutions must reflect regional realities.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

- Effective engagement with leaders in elected roles is both more critical and difficult than ever, making training on conflict resolution a high priority.
- In a number of rural regions and communities, there is a definitive need to create training programs and a leadership pipeline for nonprofit boards.
- Nearly all communities have emphasized the importance of engaging young people in leadership, which will require addressing the varied barriers they currently face.
- More limited financial resources mean rural leaders invest in relationships and social capital, assets that often make their communities feel more resourced than they may appear. Rural leaders emphasize that policies developed at the state level can ignore the human and financial constraints of rural communities.

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

The initial phase findings reveal a leadership ecosystem under strain but rich in commitment, resilience, and potential. Leaders across Colorado share common challenges: burnout, complexity, polarization, and resource constraints. Yet, they also demonstrate deep relational capacity and strong internal motivation. Understanding leadership as an ecosystem provides a framework for addressing structural barriers, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, activating new leaders, and navigating complexity together. The findings from Phase 1 provide a strong foundation for deeper exploration and practical strategies planned for future phases of this initiative.

In 2026, phase two of our initiative will move from listening to activation. We will be engaging with existing (and new) partners, utilizing targeted insights to co-design activations across our state's regions and sectors. Additionally, we plan to expand our data infrastructure through the creation of a statewide leadership survey collecting ground-level insights that continue to show the gaps and opportunities across our state.

In 2027, we plan to host a Leadership Summit and present all of our learnings and the action steps we will take going forward.

For more information and future updates, visit <https://boettcherfoundation.org/state-of-leadership/>