

# Listen First, Lead Together: Advocacy and Power Dynamic

08/10/2025

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## Proem

*Learn with People on the Journey toward Best Health.* That's my tagline. Let's break it down. *Learn with People* implies endless curiosity with the people I travel with. Makes sense, I'm a networking extrovert who learns best with others. I prefer to travel with selected peeps (my team). Best health means accepting current circumstances and maximizing abilities, function, and spirit. So, we're headed to a relatively better place, or at least the best possible health given whatever circumstances of the moment. A *journey* typically involves a destination (goals), tactics, and costs. The only guaranteed person on the team is me, you, or us, depending on whether it's community health. Otherwise, the team is constantly changing. Who's on the team, who's off? Travel implies choices. Right, left, up, down, stop, rest, shop, eat. We can't continue without making decisions together. Decision-making means power, group dynamics, and trust-governance. I broke all this down to get to governance, small group governance. After 50 years in health care, I'm still a student of governance. How do we, as mission-driven teams, attain our health goals with the power we possess? How do we collectively nurture healthy group dynamics with transparent and somewhat equitable power?

Just as my next-door neighbor, [Ronda Alexander](#), was about to move, I learned that we shared an interest in community advocacy, governance, and power dynamics. And where was she moving? Back to Detroit—my old neighborhood. Small world. I took the opportunity to record a chat with Ronda before she left.

## When did you first realize health was fragile?

**Ronda Alexander:** It was becoming a parent. When you become a parent, you're responsible for somebody else's health. And up until then, I've been relatively healthy all my life. I had taken it for granted. But I think recognizing that I have this little human that I'm responsible for and have to make sure to keep them healthy, and that was a time when I was like, oh wait, health is, it's tricky. It can change at any moment. My kiddo has nut allergies. They had an egg allergy, and they have asthma. And so, just things I hadn't paid attention to before caused me to think about the environment around me. I think another thing that helped me realize health was fragile was recognizing the interconnection between physical health and the community and environment around you. When I started working for an organization focused on health equity, I learned that the social determinants of health — your community, your environment — have a significant impact on your health. And that answered so many questions for me.

## Vital Village Network

**Health Hats:** Can you tell us about some of the organizations you've been working with?

**Ronda Alexander:** For the last seven years, up until about two months ago, I worked for an organization called [Vital Village Networks](#), based out of Boston Medical Center. The focus of that organization is health equity and child wellbeing, but from a community leadership standpoint. Upon joining the team, I



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was responsible for building a national learning community called [The Networks of Opportunity for Child Wellbeing](#), supporting and working with 10 coalitions from across the country across 10 states who were working on various aspects of health equity. We're working on some specific innovations in their communities. Centered on prenatal to eight. So early, early childhood. Moving from preschool to elementary school, what does that mean for families, and what does it look like?

## Leadership, Impact, and Measurement

Some coalitions focused on birth equity and birth justice, while others focused on community leadership or community grant-making. They all approached it from different lenses, but one key aspect was conducting research and measuring the impact of their work on their respective communities, as well as examining the collective impact.

In addition to helping them determine what we'll work on together, we also need to figure out how to uplift the folks we're saying we want to help and support, putting them at the center and in positions of leadership and power. We also asked, "What does it mean to measure that, and how do we design systems of measurement together?" We designed survey questions to understand how people would tell stories and what that process looked like, co-designing those evaluation tools.

## Data Storytelling

We recognized that research and data can come from a variety of places. It can be stories, it can be numbers, it can be a combination of the two. And that folks in the community, folks most impacted, can have some ownership over that. We often would do workshops on building capacity, helping folks recognize that they have a story to tell, uplifting different kinds of data, storytelling, and using that data, whatever information they wanted to do to impact change, then to say, okay, we're noticing this about our community based on this data. Now, how are we going to respond to it?

## Community Research Collaboration

**Health Hats:** The organization that you worked for was a community-based organization integrated with a research team. Did that originate out of the community? Did that arise out of Boston Medical Center? What was the academic connection?

**Ronda Alexander:** The founding director of Vital Village Networks, [Dr. Renee Boynton-Jarrett](#), was a pediatrician and a researcher by nature. I launched and founded the organization. First, we're starting by listening to the community and understanding their stories and needs. The organization's three pillars focused on community leadership and design. So, we listen to the community and bring people together. How do we work together? And then, how do we use data as a catalyst for the transformation? As the organization grew, it started to focus very locally in the Boston area. We have



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grown to have a national arm, which I mentioned earlier. But it also has a research and evaluation arm. So, designing and co-designing research efforts within the community. I was connected to it. I wasn't necessarily doing a lot of that research, but I understood the value and how all those things fit together.

One project I worked on with a coalition in Baltimore, [B'More for Healthy Babies](#), involved conducting research in their community. They were committed to making it community-based and designed in partnership with the community. So, the research and evaluation arm of the organization was then able to support them in doing that.

## Funding

**Health Hats:** So, how was this funded?

**Ronda Alexander:** So the funding came from private foundations. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was a funder. The Doris Duke Foundation was a funder. We've worked on projects with the Pritzker Children's Initiative of the Boston Foundation, which also funded parts of our work. Additionally, a significant portion of our funding came from private foundations, and the organization also pursued national grants. They partnered with the Department of Public Health. And so that's where some of the research, some of the research was happening in partnership with the Department of Public Health.

## Convening, Facilitating

**Health Hats:** One more time about your role in that.

**Ronda Alexander:** Most of my role was facilitating, bringing folks together, and having the conversations. How do we have the conversations? Because often folks want to do work together and don't necessarily know how or where to start. If you have a stake in the outcome, it's tough to facilitate or to hold that space. And it brings a different level of power dynamics.

We were a convener. We would bring folks together, hold the space, help them design it, but then it was led by the community, by the coalition.

**Health Hats:** That sounds like fun.

**Ronda Alexander:** It was so much fun. Yeah. I learned so much in that work. I feel like it took my career. It took my perspective on the world and my approach to working with communities to a whole new level. I am just learning how to listen. The key was about listening, not having all the answers, and not trying to give them, which I think is key when it comes to working with the community. And when I say



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community, I'm referring to the folks who are most impacted, right? We should be listening. Anybody who's working in the community should be listening to those folks. We should be centering their voices if we want to do things differently. And that was what that work was all about: helping them work together.

## Getting Started at Henry Ford Academy

**Health Hats:** Back up a little. I should have started with this, but whatever. Here we are. Tell us a little bit about your career that led up to this opportunity.

**Ronda Alexander:** I'm happy to do that. And I will say a little bit of it starts with high school. I was born and raised in Detroit. I attended one of the first charter schools in the metro Detroit area, the [Henry Ford Academy](#), located within the [Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village](#). This indoor-outdoor museum complex, where Henry Ford collected various Americana, was a unique setting sponsored mainly by Ford Motor Company. That would be important. So, in my junior year of high school, I decided to study abroad. Lived in Austria for a year and graduated from high school. Went on, and right after I graduated college, my advisor from a study abroad program reached out to me, and she said, "Do you remember that high school you went to and Ford? And I was like, of course. Wasn't that long ago."

## Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies

She mentioned that Ford has developed a curriculum based on that high school and is collaborating with individuals nationwide. They're sponsoring students to study abroad and would appreciate it if someone connected to them could speak at a conference.

No problem. I'm always up for traveling and exploring new places. And so, I went to the conference. Said a few words. I don't remember what I said. But the head of the program at that time, called [Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies](#), said, Hey, I have a position open, and I would like to interview you right now. It all took a long time, so I ended up going to grad school. But they offered me an internship, which marked the beginning of my career with Ford, Ford Pass for short. It was about connecting business and industry, community and education, to foster community prosperity - workforce development. How do we think about the relevant industries? How are we building pipelines and preparing students? Preparing young people to go into the workforce and building skills, because what we're hearing from employers is that people can technically do their jobs. Still, they lack skills in problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. This curriculum helped students do that in high school.



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## Teaching Takes a Village

But rather than just have all that fall on a teacher, what would it look like if it fell on the entire community? And so, I was thrust into that. I'm not a teacher or educator, but I've been collaborating with teams of teachers to explore how we can work with businesses, industries, and the community to make teaching and learning more relevant.

Since kids struggle with math, as adults, we don't spend 10 minutes or an hour on math, then switch to science for an hour. It's all very much connected and integrated. So it was about that connection. I worked with school districts across the country, from New Mexico and California to Philadelphia and New Jersey, as well as throughout the South, focusing on the concept of career academies. So again, this space is where a team of teachers would work together, integrating their curriculum through the lens of business and industry. So that might look like an engineering academy approaching all their math, science, English, and social studies through the lens of engineering, as well as through engineering courses.

## Back to Detroit

So that's where I started. And I was doing this great work all over the country, and then I said I would love to see this work happening in Detroit. Why is it not happening in Detroit? Or how is it happening? How can I be a part of that? I worked at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan for a couple of years, collaborating with Detroit Public Schools to explore what this looks like and how we can help teachers understand it. How can we effectively integrate work-based learning? But then I realized I missed working all over the country, because I was like, "I don't know what's happening." I don't know what people are doing. Until recently, I never thought of myself as a connector, but I think I am. Because I'll hear about work that somebody is doing in New York or New Jersey and say, You know what? There's a great group in Western Washington who's doing this work. I think you all should talk. I knew I wanted to move to the Boston area, so I began looking for small organizations that were doing mission-based work. And I stumbled upon Vital Village Networks, and that was a game-changer. Wow. And so that's my trajectory.

## Power Dynamics

**Health Hats:** Fascinating. You were talking earlier about power dynamics. And I just think that's a key challenge that people have a hard time recognizing and facing and managing it. And it's inevitable. It's the human condition, with its inherent power dynamics. And sometimes they work for somebody, and sometimes they don't, and probably often they don't. And so how do you keep that lens when you're facilitating these cross-stakeholder groups? Like, how do you approach that?

**Ronda Alexander:** Yeah, so the first thing in approaching it is understanding what the goal is that they're trying to get to? What do you want to do together? What are you uniquely positioned to do as a group



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in your work? And before I even start facilitating. It's having conversations, some pre-design conversations, and then collaboratively designing the goals, designing the agenda, checking in, and saying Here is how, based on what you're saying, based on the work that you wanna do, where you wanna get to, here is how I think we can get there. How does this resonate with you? Also, my particular style of facilitation and holding space is very much participatory. I spend very little time at the front of the room giving information or talking to folks. I set some context, and then it's off. It's up to the group. I ask some questions to ensure the conversation is interactive and we hear everyone's voice.

It's also recognizing that you have some people who process very quickly. Process out loud. In a room, when it comes to power dynamics, those are typically the folks who are talking a lot. And in those situations, the loudest person is usually heard. And so it doesn't leave space for folks who are a little quieter, who process a little differently, to have any input. And so making sure that there are small group conversations, extensive group conversations, that there's time to write and process, and that there's silence space. So, all of that plays a role, I think, in beginning to manage the power dynamics and also understanding who's in the room. I recently worked with a team, and yes, the supervisors and leaders were in the room, but they made a point to step back, be more reserved, and genuinely listen to and lean on their team. So, folks felt like their voices were heard. And then, the last thing I'll say about power dynamics in holding space is that we should develop agreements on how we want to work together and help the group hold each other accountable for those agreements.

Norms: Don't Be a Jerk

**Health Hats:** One of the things that I like to watch or think about, like this business of norms and so often norms are stated in the negative, there's some variation of don't be a jerk, and what's interesting is when you come across people who are, can lay out those norms in the positive. So, can you think about it? I'm proselytizing a little, but when you consider the norms, do you bring them in? How do you establish norms within any group?

**Ronda Alexander:** That is a great question. I do both. But I don't start with mine. For instance, I recently led a group through a conversation about the images or words that come to mind when thinking about a team or group of people functioning well. What does it feel like? Where do you struggle? How do you know when it's not working? And then what's the impact that working well together will have on the work that you wanna do? And then based on that conversation, I ask them to then think about what things you, yourself, will commit to coming into this space, and what do you need your peers or your colleagues to commit to coming into this space? And then we read them out. And have a conversation and ask for clarity. And ask folks, are these agreements that you can agree on for how you want to show up in this space together? Typically, folks say yes, and then I ask them to think about one agreement they can focus on for today. Because trying to do 'em all can be overwhelming. Pick one thing you can



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focus on and hold yourself accountable for today. So, that's how the group is designing those agreements. Following that, I offer, as a facilitator and holder of space in this room, my support.

Here's what I need, nine times out of ten. These come up anyway. But I ask people to be as present as possible. Take care of yourself. Folks usually say this next one in one way or another, but it's watch your airtime. How often are you speaking? How much are you saying? But show up as yourself, like you're in this room because your gifts, your voice, your perspective are needed. I encourage folks to pay attention to both intent and impact. Often, one of the agreements that comes up is to assume good intent. Yes, we have good intentions, and that can have a different effect than you want. So, you pay attention to that and know that we're going to hurt each other in one way or another, but let's hold that and make space for that. Use I statements, tell the truth, but with dignity. You can share your truth without being a jerk. Often ask people to trust the process and then have fun. Having fun is always one of my agreements. I want people to smile, laugh, even if it's hard work, because that's what we should be doing. We should bring some joy to it. Yeah, that's how I reach agreements. And then, often, folks may carry those forward if they don't have agreements already.

First, Take a Few Seconds

**Health Hats:** One organization I worked for had people involved in every aspect of their work. They would hardwire space after each speaker, which was a lot. And that was an interesting, yeah. Just. Because I am, my mind just goes, and I'm thinking, what did Ronda say? What do I feel about that? And I've got this, like my little voice that gets in the way of listening. And if I can just shut it. It doesn't matter what I'm thinking while Ronda's talking.

**Ronda Alexander:** I just wanna say I absolutely love that. I haven't done that before. I'm gonna try that, like pause, even if it's for five seconds. Like pause. Think about it, process it, and then decide if you still have something to say.

Governance

**Health Hats:** What we're talking about in a way is how all these groups, how these different groups, teams, organizations, govern themselves. And sometimes it's very formal, sometimes it's informal. But. When working with different groups, how do you think about the concepts of group, team, organization, and governance? Yeah.

**Ronda Alexander:** Yeah. I think one key aspect is to consider what decisions need to be made, as I believe much of governance stems from decision-making. What are the decisions that need to be made? Where are we in that process? Understanding the things that are given, right? Like these are things that just are. And so, when I think about governance, those are the things that I think about. And then, how



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are we going to make decisions? Is it voting, is it consensus? Is it talking it out until we are unanimous on it? Which is different from consensus. Because consensus is, I either like it or can live with it. If I disagree, here's why. And talking that through. That plays a significant role, but I also think it depends on the ethos of the group. What's the vibe that you're going for? Do you want something formal and rigid? Or do you want something a bit more amorphous, and it can flow?

## Fast or Sustainable Decisions

But the other thing is that there has to be time dedicated to deciding, yes, how are we going to do this together? And what's at stake if we don't? And recognizing, especially when groups come from different sectors, organizations, or parts of the community, also understanding why we are in the room? What's our why, and how is it connected to what we're trying to do collectively? You'll hear me say collectively, collaboratively, co-design a lot, but really, that's how we have to do it. Because yes, you can make decisions and things can go fast, but is the idea fast, or is the idea to get to what you want?

**Health Hats:** Yeah. So fast and sustainable are different. But there are times when. Fast is what's needed. I know that it's like now with this chaos. We're in the middle of yeah. Sometimes, though, the decisions you need to make are really fast. And the more I think that we can think ahead. That this is what we're gonna do if we get to this or here are our principles that if we're gonna need to make quick decisions, they're gonna be based on these principles and then take the time to come up with those principles before you're faced with that, which is sometimes you can do and sometimes you can't.

**Ronda Alexander:** I think you mentioned something key, specifically being proactive. Because when you're trying to be responsive, you don't have time to be. You don't. And so I'm reminded of something this woman used to say to me: "Slow is smooth and smooth is fast." Sometimes, if you go slow at the beginning, it's a good idea to take a little bit of time and think strategically.

I was saying this the other day as I was facilitating a strategic planning session, like chess players think. Good chess players think seven to eight moves down the board. So, at the beginning of our work together, how can we be thinking seven to eight moves down the board? Because we know we're going to disagree, and some stuff is going to come up. So if we can make that decision now, when it comes time to be responsive, we've already built that muscle because we've been doing it together and doing low-stakes things together early on to make that puzzle too.

## Who are the Decision-makers?

**Health Hats:** So, who's gonna be listening to this? Who listens to me? People who are advocates, activists, movers, shakers, and improving the health of people themselves, their families, and their communities. Yeah. One thing I think that group of people is interested in is the challenge of balance.



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That. So, these people, who come to a forum that you're facilitating, are coming from their organization, their team that has its challenges, and the people who come are not always the formal decision makers. Sometimes they're the informal decision makers. Sometimes, some people care but lack the power to make a difference. How does a representative get a seat?

**Ronda Alexander:** Yeah. When I think about coalition work in particular, especially if I'm thinking about like the steering committee or the group that's making decisions for this coalition and it's representing a variety of organizations, the question is, before you come into the room or send somebody in the room, what authority do they have to make decisions or to speak or represent on behalf of your organization, on behalf of your group? If you're sending an intern to a coalition without the broader context, they're not allowed to make decisions. You've not only wasted their time, but you've essentially done so. They might learn something, but you are wasting the group's time and slowing things down, especially if you plan to come in later. And so I think one. Understanding why, when folks, when you're bringing people together to do any sort of work together, what's the why? Why is it there? And then, why is that important to each person and organization represented, and how will it help them achieve their goals? Even though we are, we want to be a collective and work together. In the back of our mind, we're thinking of our own goals and what we're supposed to achieve. How does what we might do together impact and support? My goals, your goals, the goals of the folks to the left and the right of me. And so, really thinking about that, and there's a shift in mindset too. There's a shift in mindset in that things can't all be. If we keep doing things the way we've always done them, we're going to get what we've always got, and it was designed in that way. So, if you want a different outcome, we have to change the way we work. This means building in time to connect as humans and stepping into a space together, being clear about why you're there. What decisions am I allowed to make? What can I contribute, and be ready and willing to do so? I need to be a bit vulnerable, knowing it's going to be messy, and be willing to work through the mess together.

## Coalition Building

**Health Hats:** Yeah, that's good. As a retired person, I appreciate not being an employee or a boss. And so I have a lot of control. But that's not the case for most people involved in this work. And the trust factor of being able to say a person can come in and be the uber decision maker, but it's a whole other thing to go back when you're with the challenges of everyday dynamics, when you go back. You're trying to steer the organization and build trust with this coalition group so you can be open about this, which is what I'll have to deal with when I get home. Having the coalition help you prepare is beneficial. Does that come up sometimes in your groups?

**Ronda Alexander:** I think it can come up, I think it does some, but most of the time, once I'm working with the coalition, they have decided this is what we're going to do together. And there's also thinking about your level of input, right? Or do you want to be a decision maker in all the mess? Do you wish to



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be informed and tell other people about it? How do you want to contribute and have space when you're coming together as a coalition again, or any group, to say, "Here are my limitations, or here are my boundaries." Boundaries is a better word, not limitations. Here are my boundaries. I need to work within these bounds, and I can do so by being upfront about my limitations and asking the group for support. Here are my boundaries. When I leave here and return to my organization and team, I need to be able to say these things. And how do we do that?

## Talking Points

One group I worked with this time was state-level folks working in early childhood, specifically from prenatal to age three. They decided to develop talking points at the end of every meeting.

**Health Hats:** I like that.

**Ronda Alexander:** That they would take back to their respective organizations. Here are some talking points, such as decisions made and issues addressed. Here's what we did in this meeting. Here are the decisions that we made. Here's what's coming up next. But they all had the same talking points. So, folks knew they were going to hear essentially the same thing. And I found that I like that. I like that. I found that to be helpful to them.

**Health Hats:** I think the trust also increases when the numbers are smaller. So, having the breakouts allows us to discuss these issues. It's just Ronda, me, and someone else. The three of us are a lot different than talking with 20 people around a table.

**Ronda Alexander:** Absolutely. Anything I facilitate, there's gonna be some time for you to think to yourself individually, for you to talk it out with a small group, before we come and process it as a big group. Because of that, everybody's voice gets heard. When it's just two or three of us in a group, we either have to talk or participate. That becomes a little easier to manage if you get anxiety or if it's hard for you to speak in a larger group.

## First, We Listen

**Health Hats:** So what haven't we talked about in this realm that you think we should have?

**Ronda Alexander:** I don't know if I would say we haven't talked about it, but I've touched on it. But one thing I'd love to say to anyone working in health with the community in coalitions: listen first, and think about who you're trying to serve. You want to serve. Who is furthest from the opportunity that? And then listen to them. Listen, not thinking about what you know to be true or what you understand, but start by listening and trusting what folks are saying. And be open, be curious



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**Health Hats:** When you say the farthest from, what does that mean?

**Ronda Alexander:** So, a lot of times my work is in communities that serve black and brown folks, immigrants, and indigenous folks. I'm thinking about the folks with the least resources. The highest amount of need is also the most difficult for them to access resources. And so, a lot of the time, the work is about shifting outcomes for this marginalized group of people. Great. And here's what we're gonna do about it. My first question is, what has that group of people said? What is it that they need? What are they asking for? We can be mindful of what we care about and what's important to us, but what are the people we are trying to serve asking for? And how do we know? Is it hearsay, or are they in the room? Are they at the table? And make sure there's space at the table for those folks, not just a token. Okay, we have a community member. No. Have a few and listen to them.

**Health Hats:** Yeah.

**Ronda Alexander:** I think that's the biggest thing I would add.

**Health Hats:** Wow. Thank you.

**Ronda Alexander:** It's been a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

## Reflection

Words matter—words in context, cultural, political, social, and personal context. Today, the term “**marginalized** communities” triggered me. What is the power dynamic of the label? Marginalized is a description of exclusion, being pushed to the edge. Can certain people be marginalized in some contexts and marginalize others in other contexts? Essential for me to know is that marginalized is NOT an identity. [Marginalization refers to the inequality certain individuals face in society due to power imbalances built into our systems.](https://www.health-hats.com/pod237)

Power imbalances occur between groups and within groups. Awareness of and transparency about power imbalances are key to best health and successful governance. I’m grateful for Ronda Alexander’s stories about herself and her experience with community health groups. I’m a veteran of facilitating collaborative groups. From Ronda, I learned about fast and sustainable decisions, understanding the personal and representative goals of each participant, and transparency about power and decision-making. I love the focus on practicing decision-making in low-stress situations so that ethics can become muscle memory in high-stress moments. Considering the communication styles of participants is helpful. Some individuals are quick-thinking, while others have slow processing. I need sandpaper between my brain and mouth so I take time to process. As Ronda said, be present, take care of yourself, watch your airtime (how much you're talking versus listening), show up authentically, pay attention to both your



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intentions and your impact on others, use "I" statements, tell the truth with dignity, trust the process, and have fun. Thanks for joining me in this chapter of *Learn with people on the journey toward best health*.



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