



# Confronting Wicked Problems

5 Strategies for Reimagined  
Leadership in the Social Sector

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## Executive Summary

Our complex, changing world continually challenges leaders to be flexible and innovative. At the heart of efforts to create change, nonprofits, agencies, communities, and funders are working to uncover the roots of some of our greatest social issues, so-called “wicked problems.”

At the Center for Creative Leadership, we have had the privilege to work alongside many social sector partners as they invest in improving the health of entire populations, transforming education to serve all, and alleviating persistent, intergenerational poverty. These experiences have led us to an increased understanding of the aspects of leadership that propel these efforts to greater success.

We believe that transformational change and networked, collaborative approaches to confronting wicked problems require reframing and expanding leadership competencies. In fact, interpersonal communication skills, a tolerance for ambiguity, and strategic thinking are as critical as ever. However, reimagined leadership requires understanding and embracing broader capabilities and frameworks.



**This paper describes 5 crucial strategies for nonprofits to achieve transformational outcomes:**

1. Moving Beyond the “Heroic” Model of Leadership
2. Leveraging Collaborative, Intentional Networks
3. Navigating a Kaleidoscopic Context
4. Learning While Doing
5. Building a Mutually Supportive Culture of Resilience

We detail the significance of these to social change efforts and suggest how best to foster their development. We believe that leadership, reimagined with these strategies, is essential, as social sector leaders collaborate to address society’s most vexing problems.

# 1 Moving Beyond the “Heroic” Model of Leadership

Complex, interdependent wicked problems cannot be tackled by expertise alone. Instead, these issues require inclusive, diverse and often community-based leadership to truly uncover and solve the root problems. Focusing on leaders as individuals can lead to a dependence on their ability to solve problems through sheer skill and force of personality. But these personal capacities aren’t sufficient to take on wicked problems, and this approach sidelines significant knowledge, expertise, and leadership talent.

CCL has long held that leadership is a group process, rather than the sole responsibility of individuals. Effective leadership is a social process that produces three critical outcomes: Direction, Alignment, and Commitment (DAC).

**Direction:** Agreement on goals

**Alignment:** Coordination of shared work

**Commitment:** Mutual responsibility for the group

In the DAC framework, leadership involves a set of practices in which everyone in a group or an organization—not just those at the top of the

org chart—plays a part. That means leadership development benefits people throughout the organization. Funders, nonprofits, government officials, community members, and others make the most progress when they collaborate and lead together to interdependently build DAC.

DAC is even more effective when it goes beyond the organization, creating a leadership model that includes the people the organization serves. Their input is critical, and engaging them with decisive leadership roles in these efforts can expand innovation and energy. For social-sector leaders, this model of distributed leadership is challenging because it includes individuals and communities that historically have not been included in positions of leadership. For real DAC to occur, those who have been excluded need access to the systems and power structures that influence their lives and the outcomes in their communities. Sometimes, this means that for leadership to take place, people who have historically held positions of authority and influence have to relinquish or shift some of their power.

Sharing leadership doesn’t mean “giving up” on an issue, stopping work, or not moving forward; it means supporting a larger, more diverse network of individuals and organizations committed to working together on a clearly defined challenge. Leaders who take the time to collectively create DAC not only benefit from buy-in from a larger group, but also see results that are stronger and more sustainable.

Let’s examine this closer. One community health and nonprofit leader development effort, co-created by CCL and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), has a significant focus not just on individual effectiveness, but on collaboration, co-creation and working with others. The RWJF Ladder to Leadership program provided leadership development to 219 emerging health and nonprofit leaders recruited into cohorts of about 30 each from 8 different

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## DAC Model



communities across the country. The Community Memorial Foundation has since adopted the Ladder to Leadership program into its leadership capacity-building efforts. The success of that approach in producing more effective leadership speaks to the importance of this shared, distributed approach to DAC.

In Ladder to Leadership, which provides emerging leaders with the skills and support to work across boundaries to have a greater impact, 95%

of participants reported that their leadership effectiveness increased. Their bosses, peers, and other colleagues confirmed this, with 90% reporting an increase or significant increase in participants' leadership effectiveness, according to formal evaluations conducted by CCL.

Moving beyond the heroic model of leadership not only involves working collectively, it also means that leaders must become more adept at intentionally connecting with a more diverse network.

## 2 Leveraging Collaborative, Intentional Networks

As we develop new leadership models to take on wicked problems, the most effective leaders will be those with the widest, deepest, and most diverse personal and professional networks. For board members, community volunteers, nonprofit employees, and others, this can be a challenge. Those individuals may be well connected with one another, but not necessarily between their disparate group identities. There are three interrelated opportunities here:

- **Extending personal and professional networks beyond routine acquaintances.** Many individuals struggle to connect with people who do not live in the same neighborhood, share the same educational background, work in similar jobs, or share their social identities. But wider networking is a must-have skill and the first step to harness the knowledge, will, and resources locked within a community's history-bound social networks.
- **Developing deep personal relationships within networks.** It's common for individuals to "know" hundreds or even thousands of people. On LinkedIn, for example, about 70% of users have more than 300 "first-level" contacts. On Facebook, nearly 60% of users have 200 or more "friends." But these kinds of surface-level relationships are inadequate for the leadership

required to create new solutions to wicked problems. Instead, leaders must cultivate in-depth relationships and real trust. Deep relationships offer the profound social support, thought-partnership, and opportunities for growth through feedback that are required for broader, long-term, social change efforts.

- **Cultivating diverse and inclusive networks.** Finally, leaders must consciously cultivate a more diverse network than most individuals typically have. Establishing meaningful relationships with people who have different backgrounds and identities, come from a variety of racial, religious, and socio-economic groups, and have different values may appear difficult, but this is vital for gaining a variety of perspectives that can result in stronger, more sustainable solutions. Leaders must find ways to engage with a wide range of people on an ongoing basis and find new commonalities over which to bond.

Deep, personal and diverse networks are the result of intentional work and take time to build. It's important for leaders to recognize the impact of a strong commitment to this work and understand that it will not only make them better leaders, but also create better solutions. Networks are no longer just for leveraging; they are vital to our shared success.



# 3 Navigating a Kaleidoscopic Context

Social-sector leaders face a variety of challenges and opportunities in their daily work—a kaleidoscope of possibilities, problems, and potentials they must navigate. On a daily, hourly, or even moment-by-moment basis, leaders must learn to shift how they communicate with others, what they're paying attention to, and how they think about problems and opportunities.

Assessments of 814 nonprofit leaders cited strategic perspective and change management as some of their most pressing challenges. These leaders—participants of the American Express Leadership Academy (AELA) co-created with CCL—represent nonprofit organizations of all sizes and from numerous sectors, including healthcare, education, services for youth, and more. They are also challenged by lack of resources, staying relevant, and navigating a constantly changing political environment. Addressing these different demands can seem overwhelming, perhaps impossible on some days. As they grapple with these challenges, these leaders also say the pace of change has accelerated in the last few years, further amplifying the difficulty.

For example, someone working in a community-engagement initiative may need to shift from collaborating and co-creating with community volunteers in the morning to deriving a polished,

persuasive pitch to funders in the afternoon, to guiding a board committee's work on strategy in the evening. Throughout the day, that leader might find herself mentoring an intern, coaching a new employee, or sitting for an interview with a journalist. All this happens in an always-on, digitally accelerated environment where leaders are expected to simultaneously innovate while acting as good stewards of resources.

In this constantly shifting context, leaders must maintain strategic focus and prevent mission creep, avoid being sidetracked by political shifts, and be aware of issues—landmines—that could derail a project entirely. They must also understand that progress often comes incrementally over long periods, and they need to sustain their efforts over months and years. They are asked to be present in the moment, while never losing sight of their guiding vision.

## Shifting the Kaleidoscope



Erik Provitt attended the AELA Points of Light program in June 2018. Erik is a staff attorney with the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) stationed at Hollis Innovation Academy, a K-8 charter-based Atlanta public

school that serves 4 west Atlanta neighborhoods. Like many nonprofit leaders, Provitt was consumed by the daily needs of his role. Because he believes that housing “is the very bedrock of who we become as people,” he had little time to shift his kaleidoscope to see the bigger picture. With the help of the in-class deliverables, his new network of nonprofit leaders, and his executive coach, Provitt was able to cast a long-term vision for his work.

“I don't know that I ever imagined having an opportunity to sit down...and talk through those higher-level things that as you're running a legal clinic, you don't have the opportunity to think through,” he said.

Provitt is now able to see 15 years ahead and continues to tackle the daily needs of those he serves.

**“ The landscape in which nonprofits operate is changing, and it’s not yet clear what that new landscape is. Today’s nonprofit leaders need to operate in uncertainty, be able to explore untested approaches, and confidently lead through change management.”**

— AELA participant

One powerful solution to these challenges is leadership coaching. Professional coaching helps individuals improve their ability to respond in the moment with the leadership competencies they already have and helps them get better at pulling the right tool out of their toolbox in a dynamic environment. Many leaders find that coaching helps them learn quicker, become more fluent at managing challenges, and achieve results faster.

Peer coaching also plays an important role in navigating the complex challenges leaders are facing.

Participants learn and practice coaching skills with their peers during the leadership journey and then take those skills back home to their own context.

Leaders who use coaching, both peer and professional, as part of the way they navigate their kaleidoscopes are better able to see, understand, and address the many challenges in front of them. Making the investment in coaching enables all social-sector leaders to gain perspective and see how a simple shift might bring clarity.

Although many leaders intellectually understand this dynamic environment, mastering the competencies to navigate it—from day-to-day relationships to big picture strategy—requires practice.

**“ ... the coach has been extremely instrumental in my career development. He’s given me such great strategies to use in my management of people and for building new leadership skills and capabilities that I’ve made great strides with my leadership development. I credit his coaching to me improving in how I coach subordinates, how I create business developments for the organization, how I save energy and how I prove my worth.”**

— AELA participant



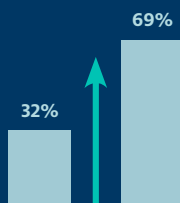
## So, what does this look like in practice?

The Kate B. Reynolds (KBR) Charitable Trust created the Healthy Places NC initiative to increase targeted rural North Carolina communities' collective capacity to create and sustain their own solutions to long-standing health challenges, such as chronic obesity and behavioral health issues. As part of the Trust's deep work in each community, they sponsored a leadership program to create broader, more inclusive networks and stronger collaboration. Together with their peers, CCL and KBR, program participants learned how to identify and influence multiple stakeholders, understand and grow their networks, and initiate and collaborate more effectively across boundaries.

As a result, participants were able to get to know other community members who shared their goals, worked together to develop innovative ideas, and collaborated more effectively and more often. This improved collective capacity of these leaders, moving their counties toward improvements in community health and quality of life.

This focus on being intentional about cultivating deeper, meaningful relationships also means leaders must recognize that their collaborations are diverse and dynamic, like a kaleidoscope.

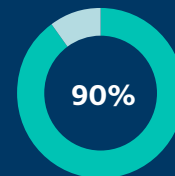
# IMPACT OF HEALTHY PLACES NC LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



Change in participants who "know" each other after 2 sessions



Increase in cohort's feeling that "local community is working effectively together to have a positive impact" \*



Those who said the cohort benefited by identifying collaboration opportunities

\* From 3.21 at baseline to 3.79 after 6 months, based on a 5-point scale



# 4 Learning While Doing

Leaders of all types, whether a deeply involved community volunteer or the executive director of a nonprofit organization, must continually learn new information, identify new perspectives, and master new skills. But in a rapidly changing and often uncertain world, where funding can be unstable and organizational strategy may shift, time rarely allows for formal, extended training and education. How then, do leaders learn, grow, and develop in the most relevant, effective, and efficient ways?

Many formal learning and development initiatives involve one or more short-term “off-site” training experiences with ongoing virtual support, such as coaching and online education, to support participants afterward. Development experiences also increasingly incorporate work-based projects and collaboration opportunities. Learning and

growth take place “on the job” and in the context of whatever organization, initiative, or community in which leaders are engaged. For this to happen, however, leaders—including nonprofit executives, nonprofit employees, and community volunteers—must have the space, time, and resources to take part in these efforts.

In practical terms, this means that any learning and development initiative involves a mix of formal learning, learning from others, and real-world practice. CCL’s 70-20-10 model posits that effective leader development involves 10% formal learning, such as through classes, 20% learning from others, such as bosses and mentors, and 70% trial-and-error learning through challenging work, like starting a new initiative or collaborating across organizational boundaries. CCL’s landmark findings in *Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* found that on-the-job learning was critical. Social sector institutions and funders should support these efforts.

Some of the most effective “learning while doing” initiatives involve teams working together to address critical challenges in new ways. In the Ladder to Leadership initiatives, each community cohort splits into smaller teams to carry out innovative projects. These included developing a social media and web-based marketing campaign to educate teens about healthy sexual behaviors, or to debunk the stigma of mental health, starting a community garden at a hospital and creating a “virtual grocer” service that allows low-income families to order healthy food online and have it delivered to their homes.

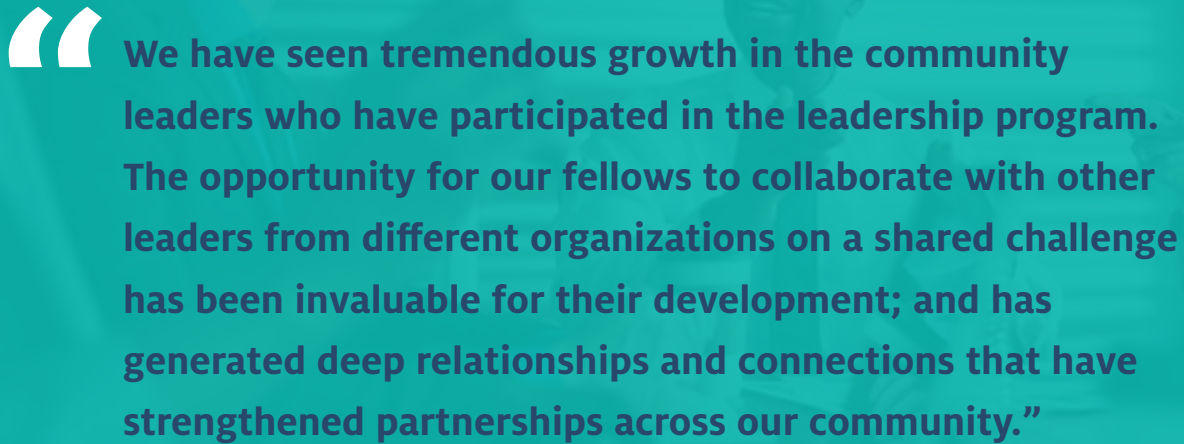
After they completed the experience, external raters, such as bosses and peers, assessed the improvement in participants’ skills in specific areas. Participants consistently showed an “increase” or “significant increase” in several key ratings including effectiveness on collaborative projects

## The 70-20-10 Rule for Leadership Development

**70%** CHALLENGE ASSIGNMENTS

**20%** DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

**10%** COURSEWORK & TRAINING



**“ We have seen tremendous growth in the community leaders who have participated in the leadership program. The opportunity for our fellows to collaborate with other leaders from different organizations on a shared challenge has been invaluable for their development; and has generated deep relationships and connections that have strengthened partnerships across our community.”**

— Greg DiDomenico, CEO of [Community Memorial Foundation](#)

(86% of participants) and work-related social networks (78%).

Cohort-based, longer-term opportunities like Ladder to Leadership invite natural learning while doing, as participants have built-in

space for intensive learning application. However, leaders who don't have access to those same programs can still benefit from the 70-20-10 model. All leaders can examine their personal and professional development plans with a focus on where they have opportunities to learn while doing. It is important to make this a regular practice, taking time each day to reflect on how learnings were applied, and what challenges to address tomorrow.

These kinds of applications of learning while doing are powerful in both the impact they can have on communities and the growth that individuals and groups can experience. A critical part of that growth, however, is ensuring that collaborations and collective efforts provide the support leaders need to sustain these initiatives over long periods.

**“ One of the specific areas that I identified for improvement through the LTL program was collaboration skills. As a result of this, even though I have strong introvert tendencies, I made a conscious effort to spearhead a multiagency grant application process that resulted in the award of a \$568,000 grant to our county for pregnant and parenting young women.”**

— Ladder to Leadership participant

# 5 Building a Mutually Supportive Culture of Resilience

No leadership effort, no matter how collaborative, empowering, and skillfully executed, can succeed if it cannot be sustained. It's vitally important that as we reimagine leadership, we ensure it is both resilient and sustainable. Real solutions to wicked problems—real change—take time, require enormous energy, and inevitably involve unexpected challenges and setbacks. Fostering resilience and sustainability at the individual, organizational, and community level makes it much more likely we'll succeed in implementing those solutions.

Nurturing resilient leadership is a multi-faceted challenge that more and more organizations are beginning to confront—in some cases drawing on traditional practices of the very communities they're seeking to serve. On the individual level, career derailment, emotional disengagement with the work, and health problems are all risks. These problems threaten individuals, but also can delay or derail entire social change initiatives. If individuals aren't able to sustain their work, critical perspectives,

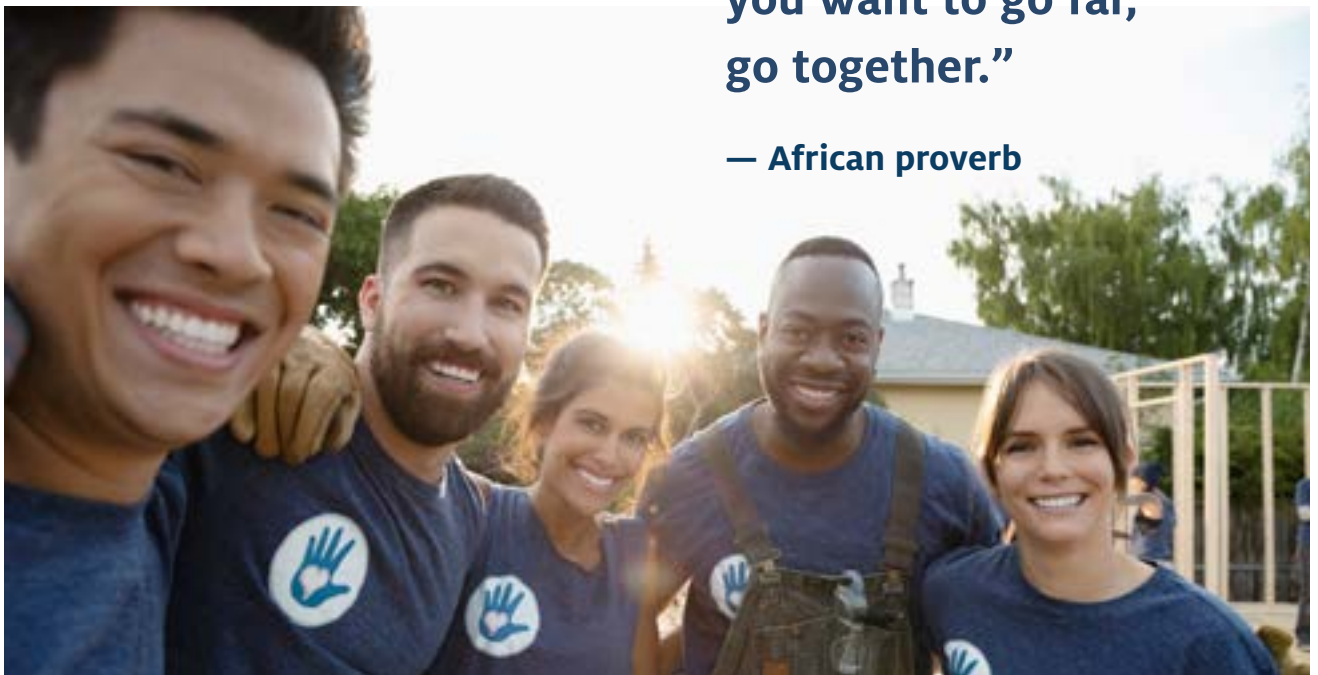
relationships, and networks may flounder, hindering future initiatives.

At the same time, treating resilience as a one-dimensional, individual characteristic is likely to exclude important stakeholders in any social change effort. For example, access to healthcare, availability of trusted mental health providers, a failure to understand the role of equity, lack of economic resources, and numerous other issues may be hard to see for some decision makers and funders. This can create invisible barriers to participation and reduce the resilience of individuals and of the social change efforts. How can someone working to reduce poverty be sustainably successful if they themselves are struggling to pay their living expenses?



**If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”**

**— African proverb**



For these reasons, we believe that resilience includes institutional-level responsibilities. Simple policies, such as flextime and more formal offerings like paid sabbaticals, appropriate benefits, and increased wages, are a start.

Funders and those in formal leadership positions must also consciously create and nurture a culture of resilience. This ranges from simple everyday practices—ensuring the working parent who has to stay home with a sick child isn't marginalized or sidelined—to substantive decisions about policies and budgets. It means leaders must recognize the systemic barriers that many communities face. Building resilience means valuing practices and policies that allow effective leadership—Direction, Alignment, and Commitment among all stakeholders—to sustain itself.

Maintaining resiliency is hard. On an individual level, for example, participants in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Executive Nurse Fellows (ENF) program know that self care, such as regular exercise and a healthy diet is important, with 80 to 90% of participants acknowledging that these healthy behaviors impact performance. But out of 18 leadership competencies, they rated themselves the lowest on “balancing work and personal life.”

Tellingly, work-life balance was rated as the least important leadership competency by ENF participants' coworkers and bosses. Sixty-one percent of executive nurses reported they would like more company support for wellness, while just 27% reported they had that support. By comparison, CCL data on female executives found that 48% said their companies supported wellness. Thus, there is a clear gap in terms of what individual leaders know is important to sustain the work and the support provided by their organizations.

We must also be mindful of systemic barriers and social structures that contribute to disparities in resiliency. For example, in our survey of alumni from our American Express Leadership Academy, we found that the primary reason leaders predicted they would leave the nonprofit field was lack of resources, followed by lack of career growth. Moreover, 31% felt their job resulted in stress beyond what would be considered normal, and while 82% felt they were equipped to lead in their current jobs, just 40% felt that they could accomplish their work without sacrificing life outside of work. This resource-scarce context challenges leaders' sense of balance, but they are still filled with confidence in their jobs. This suggests there are inherent motivational resources to tap if systems could be structured to balance work with life outside of work.

Leaders can help change these inequities and foster a culture of balance that builds on the efficacy inherent in their communities. In doing so, they will not only enable greater diversity and inclusivity in all aspects of addressing wicked problems, but also foster a community resilient enough to sustain these shared solutions.





## Moving Forward

Observing from the outside, reimagined leadership may look very different from previous approaches to social sector leadership. As funders, organizations, and communities seek to truly solve some of our most vexing and complex problems, previous approaches are not enough. Who leaders are, the kinds of problems they take on, how they connect and work, and how they sustain themselves are transforming. While leadership remains vitally important, what leadership looks like is evolving into something much more powerful.

For funders fostering systemic change in population health, poverty, educational disparities, and other enduring problems, reimagining what leadership looks like and how it works is foundational. This process includes:

- Moving beyond the “heroic” model of leadership and embracing the idea that leadership is a collective process.
- Leveraging collaborative, intentional networks that draw from communities and groups that have historically been excluded from systems of power and influence.
- Helping leaders thrive in a faster-moving, more dynamic environment.
- Encouraging leaders to learn while they also do—marrying leadership development and leadership action together as a powerful, high-value activity.
- Fostering a culture of resiliency where individuals support one another with encouragement and resources from organizations and communities.

Each of these strategies has power on its own, but together they have the potential to power a quantum leap in leadership effectiveness for social sector organizations.

Reimagined leadership can bridge boundaries and barriers, shift and multiply resources, and transform lives and communities. It is the kind of leadership we need to create strong, sustainable communities, and to co-create a society that realizes the hopes, aspirations, and full potential of every individual.

## Learn More

Looking for a leadership partner to help you address wicked social problems? Or do you have a story of how one of these strategies helped your organization or community? CCL wants to hear from you. Let us know how we can engage with you and your team to address the challenges of the social sector. Let’s reimagine leadership together.

Visit [ccl.org/transform-the-world](https://ccl.org/transform-the-world) to learn more.



## About the Authors



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## CCL Locations

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Colorado Springs, Colorado

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### Europe, Middle East, Africa

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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