

## CELEBRATING A DECADE OF PROGRESS: Welcome to the Communities of Excellence Newsletter!



### Message from Stephanie

*Stephanie Norling, Executive Director,  
Communities of Excellence 2026*

**Welcome to our newsletter!** I am thrilled to have you join us as we reflect on a decade of commitment

and progress towards our mission of fostering excellence within communities. As we embark on this journey together, we wanted to take a moment to share some highlights of our organization's evolution over the past ten years.

In 2010, what started as a “simple” conversation among friends and colleagues concerning the future of our country grew into the foundations of our 501c3 nonprofit organization. Three years later in St Joseph, Missouri, we convened leaders from six states to introduce our vision and discuss its potential. It was during this time that the first iteration of the Communities of Excellence Framework was born, laying the groundwork for our work to come.

In 2014, I had the privilege of joining this incredible organization, and in 2015, we launched pilot initiatives in San Diego County's South Region, and the 18-county region of Northwest Missouri. These early adopters provided invaluable feedback, enabling us to refine and enhance our framework and our approach. By 2016, with the establishment of the National Learning Collaborative, our network expanded, and together, we embarked on a journey of mutual learning and growth.

Over the years we have undergone two significant revisions to the framework, guided by the insights and experiences shared by our community partners. In 2022, our efforts were validated when Congress authorized “Community” as the seventh Malcome Baldrige National Quality Award Category – a testament to the dedication of our team and the support of our allies, including the National Baldrige Program and Baldrige Foundation staff.

Today, we proudly serve 26 active communities, supported

### What's New with Us:

**We are accepting applications for the 2024–2025 National Learning Collaborative:** This three-phase experience is designed for community leaders from all sectors to align and strengthen their collaborative efforts while learning how to identify, prioritize, and take action on strategic advantages, challenges, and opportunities. Visit our website for more information and request our **Getting Started Readiness Assessment**.

**Become a Member:** Our membership program provides individuals, businesses, organizations, and entire communities with a roadmap for leadership development, cross-sector collaboration, and data-driven planning and decision-making to achieve community impact. Our program has a variety of options that will benefit you.

**Become a COE Reviewer for the 2024 Assessment and Recognition Program:** Every year communities are invited to submit their responses to the Communities of Excellence Framework's systems perspective questions for objective feedback on their progress from a team of trained reviewers. The program establishes a nationally recognized standard of community performance excellence and role models of that standard. This year we have redesigned our training into a month-long experience. Visit our website for information on how you can become a reviewer and for training dates and cost.

by a growing network of volunteers, examiners, and advocates. However, our journey is far from over. As we look ahead to 2026, we remain committed to continuous improvement and excellence for all individuals within our nation's communities.

This year marks our most significant revision to the Communities of Excellence Framework yet, reflecting the lessons learning and the aspirations of we hold for the future.

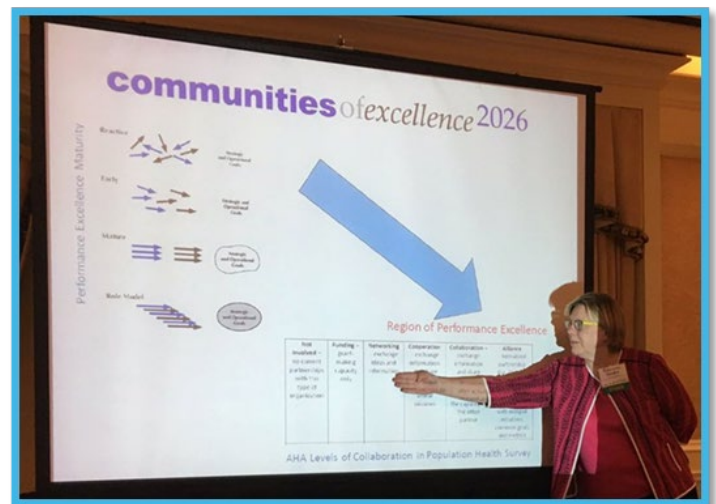
We are excited to have you with us as we continue to make strides towards our shared vision. Together we can build strong, vibrant communities.

Thank you for your ongoing support and dedication.

**Stephanie Norling**

Executive Director

**New Partnership Announcement:** Communities of Excellence has formally partnered with Culture Brokers to provide new opportunities to promote and support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within communities. Read more about this partnership in this newsletter.



# Elevating Excellence Through Inclusiveness: A Strategic Partnership Between CultureBrokers and Communities of Excellence

Communities of Excellence 2026 (COE) is on a steadfast journey toward excellence in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across the communities and organizations we serve. Reflecting this commitment, the new COE Framework places DEI at its core, recognizing it as fundamental to achieving the excellence we strive for. In our mission to foster environments where everyone thrives, we're excited to announce a strategic partnership with CultureBrokers®, a leading DEI consultancy that shares our commitment to creating equitable and inclusive communities.

## Exclusive Offer for COE Members: The Diamond Inclusiveness™ Assessment

Understanding the complexities of DEI and implementing effective strategies can be challenging. To support our members in these efforts, CultureBrokers® is offering an exclusive opportunity to access their flagship tool, the Diamond Inclusiveness™ Assessment (DIA) – Essential Version, at an unprecedented rate of \$2500, a 50% discount off the regular price. This offer is specially tailored for COE members, recognizing your dedication to advancing DEI within your COE Group and its member or partner organizations, in alignment with the COE Framework's emphasis on DEI as a pillar of excellence.

### Why the Diamond Inclusiveness Assessment?

- **Comprehensive Analysis:** The DIA provides deep insights into your organization's current DEI practices, policies, and the prevailing climate, pinpointing areas for improvement.
- **Systematic Approach:** With its straightforward process, the DIA ensures a focused analysis, highlighting critical areas for immediate action.

- **COE Systematic Approach:** With its straightforward process, the DIA ensures a focused analysis, highlighting critical areas for immediate action.
- **Immediate Impact:** The actionable strategies derived from the assessment promise not just quick wins but sustained progress in your DEI journey.
- **Expert Guidance:** CultureBrokers offers professional support throughout the DIA process, ensuring you maximize the benefits of the assessment.

**This exclusive opportunity is limited to 25 individual organizations annually, emphasizing the unique chance to fundamentally enhance your community's inclusiveness strategy, a key aspect of the COE Framework for excellence.**

## More! Digital Goodies to Empower Your DEI Journey

In addition to the DIA offer, COE members will benefit from a suite of emerging digital resources designed to support your DEI initiatives:

- **Exclusive Webinar Access:** Enjoy complimentary access to webinars covering critical topics such as inclusive community leadership, health equity, and community engagement.
- **Customizable DEI Templates:** Get free access to editable Equity Framework and Equity Strategic Action Plan templates, aiding in the development and implementation of comprehensive DEI strategies.

- Special Offers: Take advantage of a free 30-minute consultation with the President of CultureBrokers® on any DEI challenge and receive a 10% discount on any Diamond Inclusiveness™ System Package.

### Join the Journey Toward Inclusive Excellence

We believe this partnership with CultureBrokers marks a significant step forward in our collective efforts to foster inclusive excellence within our communities. By leveraging the Diamond Inclusiveness Assessment and the wealth of resources now at your disposal, your organization can embark on a transformative DEI journey, paving the way for more equitable, inclusive outcomes for all.

To seize this exclusive offer and for more details on accessing the digital goodies, email [lisa@culturebrokers.com](mailto:lisa@culturebrokers.com) with the subject line, “COE special offer”.

Together, let's champion a future where diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just ideals, but lived realities.

Learn more about CultureBrokers at [culturebrokers.com](http://culturebrokers.com) .



*"In this pivotal moment, as we strive to build communities where everyone can thrive, the partnership between CultureBrokers and Communities of Excellence 2026 stands as a beacon of progress. Integrating the principles of the new COE2026 Framework, which positions DEI as a critical component of excellence, this collaboration leverages some powerful resources to illuminate the path to a more equitable and inclusive future. Together, we're not just addressing the challenges of today; we're setting the foundations for a legacy of inclusiveness that will benefit generations to come. Our partnership is a testament to our collective belief that the journey towards excellence is paved with the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion."*



This amazing opportunity is only available to COE Members. Learn more and join the Membership Program today!  
[www.coe2026.org](http://www.coe2026.org)

# PARTNER HIGHLIGHT

## Thrive Excelsior Graduates Their Third Citizens Leadership Academy Cohort

*By Kim Halfhill, Founder, KH Consulting and Thrive Excelsior Community Coach*

**Where do we go from here?** Nearly three years into our community performance excellence journey, Thrive Excelsior (Excelsior Springs, MO) encountered new challenges relating to community engagement and the sustainability of our long-term cross-sector collaborative efforts. Thrive Excelsior began in 2017 as a community excellence group. Excelsior Springs, Missouri is located approximately 30 miles northeast of Kansas City. Excelsior Springs is a small town, with a population of less than 11,000 in the city limits and approximately 17,000 within our zip code, which better represents our community boundaries. Our community excellence collaborative effort includes nearly 50 individuals across many sectors of the community including economic development, healthcare, local government, education, social services, and residents.

From 2017 to 2020, our community-wide survey showed a continuous decline in satisfaction with overall community engagement among residents and other stakeholders. During this same time period our steering team (leadership and governance group) began wrestling with difficult questions around sustainability. How do we ensure that we are preparing systems-leaders to support this effort now and in the future? How do we deepen the community's understanding of the complex challenges facing us and foster a spirit of resiliency that enables current and future leaders to navigate these challenges? We identified a strategic opportunity to build leadership capacity across the community to support a sustainable systems approach to community development.

After months of brainstorming and planning, Thrive Excelsior launched a pilot program of its Citizens Leadership Academy in 2022. The goal of the program is to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing our community and broaden the perspectives of residents and other stakeholders who hold both formal and informal leadership roles. This knowledge will help prepare new and seasoned community leaders to face these challenges.



The Citizens Leadership Academy takes place over the course of three months, with bi-weekly in-person sessions. Prior to each in-person session, participants are asked to complete a homework assignment to provide foundational knowledge on the topic. Each session takes place at a different location around the community and includes the opportunity to hear from local community experts on the featured topic. Topics include community leadership, systems thinking in a community, health and wellness, economic development, education, and housing and public works.

To date, three cohorts (including the pilot) have graduated from the Citizens Leadership Academy. The feedback from graduates and featured guest speakers is outstanding. 100% of our graduates say that the Citizens Leadership Academy increased their overall knowledge of the Excelsior Springs community and 30% have taken on a new or enhanced leadership role within community, including several who have become part of Thrive Excelsior.

The Citizens Leadership Academy is proving to be an important strategy for growing our capacity and capability to THRIVE in Excelsior Springs.

