

Why Our Ready by 21 Team Jumped for *Leap of Reason*

By Brad Bryant

Atlanta's Ready by 21 Leadership Council is one of the strongest in the country. *Leap of Reason* is a powerful book about the importance (and difficulty) of building a performance management culture that is embraced by everyone from the rec room to the board room. In this blog, the leadership council meets the book. I hope the results inspire all of you who are working to make fundamental changes across systems to improve the odds for young people.

Karen Pittman, Co-Founder and CEO
The Forum for Youth Investment



Brad Bryant

About a year ago, I was invited to Washington, D.C., to hear someone discuss his book about how leaders can work together better to achieve community change. I expected to be enlightened; I didn't expect to come home with copies of a book that so reinforced our collective impact work that it became almost required reading for our Ready by 21 team in Atlanta.

Mario Marino's *Leap of Reason* spoke directly to our vision and our challenges. You'll soon see why.

Like many leaders around the country, we in Atlanta were drawn to Ready by 21 by our frustration that, despite our best intentions, progress for the youth in our community was happening at an unacceptably slow pace. Implementing Ready by 21 led us to see the development of our youth as the systemic pipeline that it is; we opened our eyes and ears to our fellow leaders working at different points on the pipeline and the insulation. The new relationships converted collective frustration to collective resolve. Barriers between

educators and social sector providers collapsed.

Still, some of the more impatient members of our Ready by 21 Leadership Council thought we needed a spark to make our efforts take off. We found a spark in Mario Moreno's *Leap of Reason*.

Mario, co-founder of Venture Philanthropy Partners, was the author that I was invited to listen to last summer at the Urban Institute in Washington. *Leap of Reason* grew from his post-retirement experience of hearing funders and nonprofit leaders lament that, despite their noble efforts, most of them could not demonstrate that their intended beneficiaries were better off as a result.

Our problem, he said, is that most social sector leaders don't manage to outcomes, and thus greatly diminish our collective impact. By failing to constantly ask "to what end," we reduce our efforts to a succession of isolated actions that are not aligned, are inefficient and are often ineffective.

He pointed to the experience of the Harlem Children's Zone as the lesson for us all: Once we understand that the outcomes we seek for all of our children are beyond our individual capacity, we can move forward to deliver on the full promise of outcomes-driven collaboration.

Mario gave an inspiring talk, then gave us enough copies of *Leap of Reason* for both the Atlanta Ready by 21 Leadership Council and for several people in the Georgia Department of Education (a member of the council).

Leap of Reason's value to our Ready by 21 work lies in what the book is not as much as what it is. Mario does not promise the usual self-help promotional: a "soup to nuts" manual offering his services at an undisclosed price. Instead, he cogently explains why government and nonprofits must rethink how they approach their work and how leaders in those sectors must reform ineffective organizational systems and cultures. He suggests that this era of scarcity demands urgent, collaborative and quantum change for those organizations wishing to survive.

For those of us carrying out Ready by 21, the book articulates both our strength – passionate leaders committed to serving our youth – and our weakness – we can't accomplish that mission using past strategies. Mario offers a framework built on such concepts as board stewardship, performance culture and clarity of purpose. He seeks to give leadership teams a "spark" by which they can make actionable decisions based on expectations.



The framework has provided guidance to our Ready by 21 team as we convert our ideas into action. It confirms that the Ready by 21 pipeline concept is on point.

As we all know, converting those ideas to action is hard – which is why we found it so apt when Mario said one of his friends had joked that the chartreuse cover of the book would be the color of radioactive broccoli. That description hits the mark on several levels: Radiation, a process wherein energy travels outward in all directions, can pierce the most impenetrable barrier. It's invisible, but it changes the environment.

Of course, radiation is harmful. Broccoli, on the other hand, is rich in nutrients and is anti-carcinogenic. But as any kid will tell you, you must cultivate an appetite for it. Even though we know it's good for us, we resist, we whine and find every excuse to avoid its inclusion in our daily discipline.

Our Ready by 21 team found in *Leap of Reason* affirmation that Ready by 21 is a process of high energy that can penetrate our most stubborn obstacles. Acknowledging that our current environment fails too many of our youth justifies the drastic changes we pursue, even though we have to overcome resistance to do what it takes to achieve outcomes-based collaboration. In the long run, it's good for us.

The final proof of Mario's motivation is that *Leap of Reason* [is offered at no charge](#) for Kindle, as an iBook and as a PDF. This gift is intended as a viral conversation-starter for leaders such as you.

Brad Bryant (bbryant@doe.k12.ga.us) is executive director of [the Georgia Foundation for Public Education](#) and co-chair of Atlanta's Ready by 21 Leadership Council, which is led by the [United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta](#).

- August 2012