

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

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**In Collaboration, Actions Speak Louder  
than Words**  
By Jane Wei-Skillern

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# In Collaboration, Actions Speak Louder Than Words

By Jane Wei-Skillern

**C**ollaboration, collective impact, networks—regardless of the term, there is keen interest among social sector leaders in working across issues and organizations in order to achieve systems-level change.

Yet to foster strong collaborations, good intentions are hardly sufficient to guarantee success. Foundation and nonprofit leaders need to change the way they work, sometimes by putting the interests of a collaborative or network ahead of those of their individual organizations.

When the Gulf region of the United States was devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, more than half a million families were displaced and in need of shelter. Twenty-one Habitat for Humanity affiliates rose to the challenge to help low-income families in the region find permanent housing by collaborating with peer organizations in new ways.

Instead of internally managing the entire process, the affiliates shifted to a networked approach. They ceded control and relied on partners to deliver much-needed services. Partners ranged from Rebuilding Together and Church World Service to repair more homes to the Salvation Army and Lutheran Social Services to identify and prepare potential homebuyers. With each organization doing what it does best, the network served more people, and did so more efficiently and effectively, than ever before. The Habitat affiliates and their partners were able to build 1,500 homes in the first 18 months following the disaster, more than 15 times their usual annual production.

According to Marty Kooistra, former vice president of collaborations and strategic partnerships for Habitat, “Letting go of tradition and control and al-

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lowing others to excel in what they do felt risky initially. But the solution to a problem is usually not understood by any one of us individually. What you require is a system orientation and a highly engaged process to see root causes before you can jointly emerge with a viable solution.”

Research on a variety of high impact networks suggests that some common patterns in leadership and strategy contribute to their success. The best results come when network leaders do three things: advance the overall mission before the organization, build strong relationships based on trust, and let go of control.

**Advance the overall mission before the organization.** Networks are successful when they are led by visionary leaders who think beyond their own organizations. Tra-

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ditional organizational planning encourages leaders to scan the environment for competitive threats and available opportunities. But network leaders see their organizations as part of a larger system, rather than a carefully guarded fortress.

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund has been able to use networked approaches to achieve impact that is exponentially greater than the fund’s modest budget. The grantmaker’s investment in networks to advance early childhood education in the state of Connecticut is deeply rooted in the community, involving parents and community partners who develop improvement plans, share information, and provide advocacy support. According to David Nee, executive director at the foundation, “This

kind of grantmaking has required flexibility and responsiveness to the communities and partners. We start by listening; others’ perspectives have informed both our strategic and operating decisions. On any number of routine operations, we are very flexible about no-cost extension and reporting requirements. Our current strategic plan resulted from listening to more than three hundred community- and state-level partners.”

**Build strong relationships based on trust.** Leaders who pursue profound change through networks also focus heavily on building relationships based on trust. When developing the Youth Matters Initiative, a career and college readiness program, staff of the Hawai’i Community Foundation consulted with dozens of leaders in the field to identify who had a reputation for working collaboratively. The foun-

dation placed more emphasis on getting the most appropriate people in the room than on selection of participants based on their formal roles. Furthermore, the foundation reflected on its own policies and practices to understand whether they might actually hinder the process of trust-building among participants. For example, the foundation realized in hindsight that issuing competitive RFPs to participants inadvertently fostered unhealthy rivalries among those it had hoped would collaborate. As a result, in later initiatives the foundation used alternative funding mechanisms.

Conventional grantmaking principles often require that grants produce a measurable return within a relatively short period of time. But network relationships require

significant investment and time to develop. Grantmakers need to provide patient capital and flexible support, knowing that relationships based on trust are built over time. More than a decade after the Memorial Fund began seeding networks among families, schools, and communities throughout the state, its network achieved major policy milestones: state legislation in 2011 that called for a two-year planning process to establish a coordinated system of early childhood development, and in 2013 legislation that unified approximately \$450 million over two years from across several agencies to support it.

Funders and nonprofits alike become better network participants when they cultivate empathy and practice humility, demonstrating understanding of other partners' perspectives and their value to the field. For example, when the Memorial Fund's Nee received an award in recognition of his leadership, he said, "Without the efforts of hundreds of parents, community residents, providers, and advocates, our strategy would have been empty rhetoric." Successful network leaders eschew the spotlight for themselves and instead use such opportunities to share attention across the network and raise visibility for their shared work. Directing recognition to the parts of the network that need it most strengthens trust and enhances the success of the collective effort.

**Let go of control.** Working collaboratively within a network requires that partners give up some of the control they are used to wielding. The Hawai'i Community Foundation, for example, wrestled with determining how big a footprint it wanted within its network. It decided to play a "strong forward role" and then gradually step back. The foundation made clear that it was available to provide support, but let grantees take the lead.

Another way to increase impact is simply to let others run with your ideas. Rather than trying to serve the tremendous need for playgrounds on its own, KaBOOM! is building community capacity to fulfill its vision of "a great place to play within walking distance of every child in America." KaBOOM! has worked behind the scenes to redirect funding to support peer organizations that might well be perceived as direct competitors. On the ground, KaBOOM! shares its core program expertise with local neighborhood leaders by giving away its

playground building kit, providing technical assistance, and sharing access to a support community, even if the project is independent of KaBOOM!

By its own estimates, a dollar spent by KaBOOM! on online tools in 2009 helped to improve 10 times as many neighborhoods as a dollar spent more directly on playground equipment. Although KaBOOM! does not

attract the media recognition or funding that typically flows from direct playground construction, it supports the community leaders because these network participants are fundamental to fulfilling its mission.

Although finding trusted partners and ceding control to others without a guarantee of success may seem perilous, the potential is almost certainly worth the risk. ✨

## COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

# Leveraging a Movement Moment

By Lori Bartczak

The 50th anniversary of the March on Washington last year served as a reminder of the power and potential of movements for advancing social change. As in the 1960s, when a window of social-change opportunity mobilized people across issues, identities, races, genders, and economic status, today we are in a period of rapid shifts that suggest we are experiencing another "movement moment."

Many grantmakers recognize this moment as both an opportunity and a challenge. Examples such as international democratic movements and steady progress in lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) rights show what can happen when a range of diverse stakeholders rally around a common vision and work together to advance ambitious goals.

But behind the scenes, this work is challenging. It requires dramatic shifts for many grantmakers, both in mindset and in practice.

### Philanthropy's (Many) Roles in Supporting Movements

Grantmakers support movements in diverse and often interconnecting ways, from decades-long general operating grants to public opinion research to community leadership development efforts. Through most of these important activities, grantmak-

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ers occupy one of five roles: investor, broker, connector, learner, and influencer.<sup>1</sup>

**Investing money and time.** As is the case for strong organizations, movements need support for infrastructure—things like support for leadership that prioritizes intentional relationship building, data and technology systems, and administrative functions. Perhaps more than anything, movements need flexible support in the form of long-term and unrestricted funding.

"In gardening, we are aware that you have to pay attention to the soil, continuously amending and caring for it in order to ensure a plant's growth," says Vic DeLuca, president of the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation. "That same nurturing, feeding, and watering is necessary to facilitate the growth of strong organizations and collaborations."

In its environmental justice work, the Noyes Foundation recognized that many activist organizations in the southeastern part of the United States were critical to the cause but needed capacity-building support, and fast. In response, the foundation established the Special Assistance Grants program, which allows foundation staff to make grants of up to \$7,500 without board approval, sometimes within a few days of a request. Special Assistance Grants have paid for things like technology systems, travel expenses, and board training—all necessary expenses for collaborative work