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ACCELERATING SOCIAL INNOVATION

[The Network Approach to Social Change](#)

By Nell Edgington



Although I already mentioned (in my [September 10 Great Reads list](#)) a really interesting [article](#) about “network entrepreneurs,” I want to further explore the concept because I think it could be a game changer for nonprofit leaders willing to embrace it.

Writing in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in September, Jane Wei-Skillern, David Ehrlichman, and David Sawyer describe a “network entrepreneur” as different from, and much more effective at creating social change than a typical nonprofit leader. As they put it:

A network entrepreneur’s approach expands far beyond the boundaries of their own organization, supporting peers and partners across sectors to solve the problem. Not surprisingly, the potential for impact increases exponentially when leaders leverage resources of all types—leadership, money, talent—across organizations and sectors toward a common goal.

And this mirrors Wei-Skillern’s earlier article from 2008, “[The Networked Nonprofit](#)” where she described how a “networked nonprofit” builds alliances far beyond its own walls and is thus much more effective at creating social change than a traditional nonprofit:

Many traditional nonprofits form short-term partnerships with superficially similar organizations to execute a single program, exchange a few resources, or attract funding. In contrast, *networked nonprofits* forge long-term partnerships with trusted peers to tackle their missions on multiple fronts. And unlike traditional nonprofit leaders who think of their organizations as hubs and their partners as spokes, networked nonprofit leaders think of their organizations as *nodes* within a broad constellation that revolves around shared missions and values.

In essence, the network approach to social change is one of true leadership — leadership writ large. Because a true leader leaves their ego, and the ego of their organization, aside in order to assemble all the required resources (individuals, institutions, networks, funding) to chart a path towards larger social change. Instead of leading an organization, a network entrepreneur is, in essence, [leading a social change movement](#).

A network entrepreneur understands that social change lives beyond any single organization. It requires someone (or a set of someones) to marshall all the necessary resources, create a larger change vision and lead people towards that vision.

This concept is so critical to nonprofit leaders who are often working with such limited resources. If instead of working to build an institution, a nonprofit leader worked to build networks, she could be much more effective at creating long-term social change.

So what does this network approach look like in practice for a nonprofit leader?

Instead of thinking just about *your* organization, *your* staff, *your* mission, *your* board, *your* donors, you must analyze and connect with [the larger marketplace outside your walls](#). You need to analyze the other people and entities working on similar challenges, and not just in the nonprofit space, but also in other sectors, geographies and time periods (yes, [history matters](#)!). Determine how other places, other people, other organizations, both past and present, addressed similar problems. You need to understand the points of leverage for attacking the problem on a much larger scale than your single organization can. Figure out who the influencers are in the space and how to connect your work with those other individuals, institutions, networks.

The network approach also requires that nonprofit leaders move away from the resource-constrained, scarcity approach that keeps them from forging alliances with other entities that might be competing for the same limited pool of funding. Instead leaders must take [an abundance approach](#) that leaves fears behind in favor of a bigger, bolder approach.

And the network approach involves having the confidence to think that there is potentially a larger solution and that you might be part of it. The dysfunctional power imbalance present for so long in the nonprofit sector has bred a [crisis of confidence](#) that keeps nonprofit leaders focused just on their own work, instead of seeing the larger picture and envisioning a larger solution or role in that solution.

The network approach to social change involves taking a big step back from the work you have always done. It requires asking a much larger set of questions. And having the faith, confidence and leadership to plug into the network for social change.

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- 3. [Are You a Social Entrepreneur?](#)
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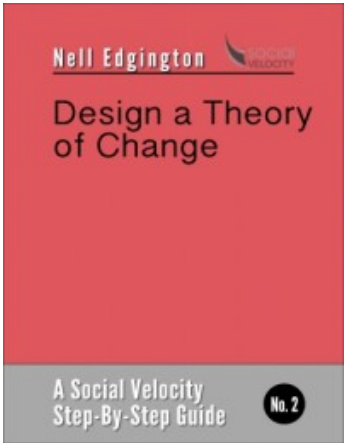
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