

Solutions

The Most Impactful Leaders You've Never Heard Of

Network entrepreneurs are ensuring that systems-level, collaborative efforts not only succeed, but thrive.

By Jane Wei-Skillern, David Ehrlichman, & David Sawyer | Sep. 16, 2015

Collaboration has taken the social sector by storm. **Collective impact** (http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact), social media, and other tools play important roles, ensuring that the right structures, resources, and technologies are in place for groups to successfully work together. But while these approaches have advanced collaboration in practice, we believe that on their own, they are insufficient for achieving transformational change. In the rush toward readily available solutions to social problems, we often overlook a powerful missing link.

In our research and experience, *the single most important factor behind all successful collaborations is trust-based relationships among participants. Many collaborative efforts ultimately fail to reach their full potential because they lack a strong relational foundation.*

The new leaders at the heart of some of today's most sophisticated, large-scale solutions to the world's social problems—network entrepreneurs—are undoubtedly some of the most accomplished leaders that you've never heard of, and they are ensuring that systems-level, collaborative efforts not only succeed, but thrive.

How is a network entrepreneur different? Rather than leading with a top-down approach, network entrepreneurs focus on creating authentic relationships and building deep trust from the bottom up. This focus on relationship-building costs relatively little yet ultimately makes a tremendous difference in impact. Network entrepreneurs ensure that the power of others grows while their own power fades, thereby developing capacity in the field and a culture of distributed leadership that dramatically increases the collaboration's efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. These individuals foster unique cultures and values among their networks that enable those networks to sustain and scale impact.

We think of network entrepreneurs as representing an evolution of social entrepreneurs. Like social entrepreneurs, they are visionary, ambitious, and relentless in pursuit of their missions. But where social entrepreneurs often struggle to scale their own organizations despite heroic efforts, 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 as a result of this work, we celebrate the change-generating network itself above any single person or institution.

This kind of humble leadership is of course not new. Jim Collins wrote about the unwavering resolve and humility of “level 5” leaders. Robert K. Greenleaf extolled the virtues of “servant leaders.” Martin Luther King Jr. said that these leaders balance power and love—the power to get things done with the love to make all boats rise. And as philosopher Lao Tzu famously noted in the 6th century BC: “When the best leader work is done the people say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

Despite this, the understanding and ability needed to apply this philosophy directly to social impact work has been limited. Newly formed, often funder-driven collaborations tend to capture the spotlight, while practitioners who have catalyzed collaborations from the ground up in the field for years or even decades quietly build momentum and continue to increase the impact of their work.

Network entrepreneurs lie behind the following three examples of remarkable social impact:

- StreetWise “MBA” through Interise (a nonprofit organization that functions as a network to help existing small business owners develop their companies), **created net new job growth at five times the rate of the private sector as a whole** (https://www.interise.org/images//2013_impact_report_web.pdf) . And since the financial recovery began, these businesses have continued to create jobs at five to seven times the rate. What's more, 93 percent of these businesses are owned by women, minorities, immigrants, or Native Americans, or are located in a low-income community.
- During a deadly cycle of bombings in Lebanon, the Lebanese association *Offre Joie* (“Joy of Giving”) mobilized a coalition of volunteers across the ethnic spectrum to rebuild bombed neighborhoods across sectarian lines for 172,000 days. The coalition's community impact was recognized by 45 percent of Lebanon's population and honored with the nation's highest civilian award. Working behind the scenes, network catalyst Dreams InDeed helped focus the mission, reinforce values, and weave the network.

- And for more than 15 years in the field of education, there has been a vast expansion of pre-school classrooms in Connecticut, thanks to a new Office of Early Childhood and more than \$50 million of new money allocated to school readiness. By training and supporting parent and community leaders, and working in close alignment with government and other advocacy groups, the network has demonstrated endurance and resilience. Some parents and community leaders who engaged with these efforts have gone on to serve in the Connecticut state legislature as advocates for early childhood education. Even during periods of serious budget deficits and cuts to many programs, early childhood education programs were largely preserved or even increased. Governor Dannel Malloy has identified universal access to early childhood education as “critical to Connecticut’s future.” These outcomes are a direct result of advocacy by 52 communities as part of the [William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund Discovery Initiative](http://www.wcgmf.org/simple.php?name=grants_disc) (http://www.wcgmf.org/simple.php?name=grants_disc).

The Four Principles of Network Entrepreneurship

We have found that despite huge differences in issue area, scale, resources, and formal roles, network entrepreneurs and their networks are remarkably similar. The networks that network entrepreneurs catalyze all demonstrate the following four operating principles:

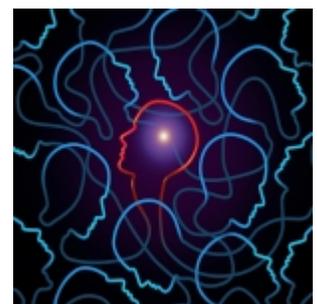
1. **Trust not control.** Strong relationships among network partners and a culture in which actors routinely invest resources into building long-term, trust-based relationships—without the expectation of control or even recognition—is critical to collaborative success. Network entrepreneurs emphasize “return on relationships” above all else. Unless they are built on a foundation of mutual respect and integrity, collaborations are unlikely to succeed, regardless of how much formal structure or strategic planning went into them.
2. **Humility not brand.** Unlike social entrepreneurs so often held up as hero-like figures, network entrepreneurs are largely anonymous by design. Early in a network’s development, these leaders are important visionaries, and stewards who help foster a healthy network culture and develop a sustainable structure. But they are deliberate about ceding their power to the collective leadership of the network and developing leadership capacity throughout the network.
3. **Node not hub.** Network entrepreneurs are keenly aware that they are few among many working across the larger system, and in this way they embody a special type of system leader, [powerfully articulated by Senge, Hamilton, and Kania in a recent SSIR article](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership) (http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership). Networks entrepreneurs not only connect to the larger system around them and foster generative conversation, but also deliberately catalyze and lead action-oriented networks that are aligned around a defined shared purpose and built on the

foundation of deep relationship. They develop a culture where no individual or organization seeks to be the brightest star. Partners and peers mobilize a constellation of resources and skills that enables the achievement of a shared vision. The network becomes the primary vehicle for delivering mission impact. Consequently, there is as much focus on engaging trusted peers outside the network entrepreneur's organization as there is on tasks within the organization.

4. **Mission not organization.** Network entrepreneurs are far more motivated to achieve maximum impact than to advance themselves or their organizations. The network entrepreneur acts as a participant, eschewing personal or organizational status in service to the mission. They often put the interests of their peers ahead of their own, as "supporting all boats to rise" actually serves the mission best. Network entrepreneurs, for example, often refer potential donors to peers that can better deliver a program or service; they don't simply seek to maximize their own organization's budget. When all network participants adhere to this principle, it becomes self-reinforcing; it greases the wheels of current collaborations and opens the doors to future partnerships.

Over the coming weeks, seven network entrepreneurs—working in environmental conservation, education, economic and community development, and beyond—will share their perspectives and lessons from more than 100 years of collective experience pioneering networks for social change. Contributors include **Interise's Jean Horstman** (http://ssir.org/network_entrepreneurs/entry/a_relational_approach_to_scaling_mission), **William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund's David Nee** (http://ssir.org/articles/entry/distributing_leadership_promoting_stewardship), Interaction Institute for Social Change's Curtis Ogden, Energy Foundation's Eric Heitz, Housing Development Consortium's Marty Kooistra, Maddie's Fund's Rich Avanzino, Sustainable Conservation's Ashley Boren, and Joy of Giving's David Haskell.

We hope that the wisdom and insight of these leaders will help inform future collaborations and fuel even greater social change.



The New Network Leader

(https://ssir.org/the_new_networ)

This series highlights the work of seven leading "network entrepreneurs," who are generating systems-level social impact in environmental conservation, education, economic development, and beyond.



Jane Wei-Skillern (@jwei_skillern) is an adjunct associate professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business and previously served on the faculty at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and Harvard Business School. For the past 15 years, she has conducted research on trust-based networks for social impact and taught graduate level courses on network leadership and culture, social entrepreneurship, and nonprofit strategy.



David Ehrlichman (@dce2020) is a partner of Converge, a strategy + design network for systems impact. Ehrlichman is committed to shifting complex, "wicked" problems in a positive direction. Along with David Sawyer, he has helped design and launch impact networks across environmental, healthcare, education, economic, and civic systems, catalyzing diverse groups of people to build trust, take action, and work together towards individual and shared goals.



David Sawyer (@dhsawyer) is a partner of Converge, a strategy + design network for systems impact. Sawyer is a strategy guy for a better world, specializing in network, design, and systems thinking. He is active across all sectors and has played roles in a variety of fields: education reform, national service, social entrepreneurship, women and girls, venture philanthropy, and environmental preservation.

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