



Change the Way You Change the World: A Model for Wide-Scale Social Change

By Leslie R. Crutchfield & Heather Grant McLeod

“Give me a lever long enough,
and I alone can
change the world.” Archimedes

Habitat for Humanity International is one of the most successful social change groups of our time—although not necessarily for the reasons you might think.

Habitat was founded in 1976 by Millard Fuller, a self-made millionaire who renounced his fortune, joined a Christian commune, and launched the organization in a quiet rural community near Plains, GA. His “housing ministry” was comprised of volunteers who built homes for people who could not afford them. He started small, building mainly in the state of Georgia and in parts of Africa.

Within a matter of decades, Habitat has grown to become one of the world’s most recognized forces for change, with a global network of 2300 affiliated chapters, a million volunteers, and hundreds of corporations collectively building houses for low-income people. With its combined budget approaching the \$1 billion mark, Habitat is one of a few younger groups to catapult up into the top ranks of the nation’s largest nonprofit organizations (as listed by the Chronicle of Philanthropy in its annual ranking 400 top nonprofits). And the value of Habitat’s brand name is on par with Starbucks.

Still, if you were to judge the Habitat’s success only by the number of houses its volunteers have built, you might be underwhelmed. Habitat’s numbers pale in comparison to those of real estate developers (for-profit or not-for-profit) that have built millions of low-income, multi-unit housing complexes. But if you look instead at the larger community of volunteers and broad circle of affordable housing evangelists that Habitat has created, its impact becomes more evident.

Habitat doesn't aspire to merely build houses for the poor, but rather to mobilize entire communities to act on the problem of poverty housing. It not only organizes volunteers to build houses, it aims to change how they think, how they act, and more recently, how they vote. While the organization has an admittedly ambitious goal—to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the face of the earth—its long-term quest is even more audacious: *“Our ultimate purpose is to put shelter on the hearts and minds of people in such a powerful way that poverty housing and homelessness become socially, politically, and religiously unacceptable in our nations and the world.”*

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Habitat for Humanity isn't just building houses. It's building a movement. Its success ultimately will be measured not only in terms of the number of houses it builds or the volunteers it mobilizes. Habitat's legacy will be marked by its ability to spark fundamental societal shifts that ripple far beyond the organization's own four walls.

SOCIAL CHANGE WITHOUT BORDERS

Habitat for Humanity is one of 12 highly-successful nonprofit organizations that we studied for our forthcoming book, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits* (Wiley 2007). We set out four years ago to understand how the most effective nonprofit groups achieve wide scale social change. Our driving question was, “What makes great nonprofits great?” We looked at the well-known, like Habitat, the less known, like Self-Help and YouthBuild, and the surprising,

like The Exploratorium. What we discovered after closely examining these dozen high-impact nonprofits came as a surprise.

The 12 Organizations	Issue Area
America's Second Harvest	Hunger relief
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities	Federal and state budget analysis, poverty
City Year	National service, youth leadership
Environmental Defense	Environment
Exploratorium	Museums, science education
Habitat for Humanity	Housing
The Heritage Foundation	Conservative public policy
National Council of La Raza	Hispanic interests
Self-Help	Housing and economic development
Share Our Strength	Hunger relief
Teach For America	Education reform
YouthBuild, USA	Youth leadership, housing, job training

“Give me a lever long enough, and I alone can move the world,” said Archimedes. The secret to successful social change lies in how great organizations mobilize every sector of society—government, business, nonprofits and the public—to be forces for good. They don’t just build organizations, they build entire movements. They shape government policy, and change the way companies do business. They nurture larger networks of nonprofits and collaborate rather than compete with their peers. They engage and mobilize millions of individuals and, in so doing, help change public attitudes and behaviors. And they spend as much time managing external relationships and influencing other groups as they do worrying about building their own organizations.

More specifically, we learned that great social sector organizations do these six things extraordinarily well:

1. Advocate and serve. High-impact organizations understand the power of policy advocacy. They refuse to choose between either lobbying for policy reform or providing direct services. Like Habitat for Humanity, many nonprofit groups may start out running programs that serve immediate needs, such as building houses for the poor or providing medical care to sick children. But eventually they realize that they cannot achieve wide scale systemic change through service delivery alone. So they add advocacy to access government resources or to change legislation, thus expanding their impact.

2. Make markets work. Tapping into the power of self-interest and the laws of economics is far more effective than appealing to pure altruism. No longer content to rely on traditional notions of charity or to see the private sector as the enemy, great nonprofits find ways to work with markets and help business “do well while doing good.” Habitat mobilizes hundreds of corporate partners in its quest to end poverty housing, from Home Depot, which contributes supplies like lumber and power tools to build sites, to Whirlpool, which promises to put clothes washing machines and dryers in Habitat homes. Beyond garnering in-kind donations, Habitat is changing the way these companies operate by mobilizing teams of corporate volunteers to pick up hammers and join the home-building movement. It has become an effective employee recruitment and retention strategy for corporations, as staff members are motivated and inspired by their corporate-sponsored volunteer efforts.

Leading social change groups don't want simply to apply social Band-Aids, but rather to attack and eliminate the root causes of social ills.

3. Inspire evangelists. Great nonprofits see volunteers as much more than a source of free labor or membership dues. They create meaningful ways to engage individuals in emotional experiences that help them connect to the group's mission and core values. Habitat for Humanity has aced this practice; its home-building projects are natural ways for its volunteers to perform meaningful, hands-on work that bear immediate, visible results. These volunteers become so inspired that they spread the word among their circles of friends, church groups, synagogues, corporations, and other networks. It's a virtuous cycle.

4. Nurture nonprofit networks. Although most nonprofits pay lip service to collaboration, many of them really see other groups as competition for scarce resources. But high-impact organizations help the competition succeed, building networks of nonprofit allies and devoting remarkable time and energy to advancing their larger field. Habitat for Humanity tapped into the worldwide network of religious organizations and nonprofit groups that want to make a difference, establishing affiliates in partnership with existing organizations and building out their programs from there.

5. Master the art of adaptation. Successful social change requires that nonprofits listen, learn, and modify their strategies based on external cues and internal evaluation. Even Habitat, which in the beginning refused to accept government funding and shied away from policy reform, changed its ways over time. When the federal AmeriCorps program presented an opportunity to attract hundreds of thousands more volunteers into the housing movement, Habitat joined the program, accepting government support and significantly expanding its ranks of volunteers. They adapted, and did so because the change allowed them to achieve greater results.

6. Share leadership. Habitat founder and CEO Millard Fuller, and his successor, Jonathan Reckford, ooze charisma. But they also know they must inspire leadership in others if their organization is to become a stronger force for good. They distribute leadership throughout their organization and their networks of religious and nonprofit groups—empowering others to take action.

These are the six things that high-impact nonprofits do to achieve extraordinary results.
In summary:

High-impact nonprofits do this	...Not this
Work externally with all sectors of society	Focus exclusively on their own organization
Advocate for policy change and run programs	Only provide direct services, avoid politics
Harness market forces and work with business	Avoid engaging with business or capitalism
Engage outsiders in meaningful experiences; build long-term relationships	Treat volunteers as free labor or donors as check-writers; focus on transactions
Nurture networks of nonprofits, build the field	See fellow nonprofits as “competitors”
Constantly adapt	Become mired in bureaucracy, or get overwhelmed with too many ideas
Empower others to lead and take action	Maintain a command-and-control hierarchy, and allow the CEO to be the “hero”
Use leverage to change entire systems	Use organizational growth to scale impact

Each one constitutes a powerful approach in itself. And when a group applies all of these practices simultaneously, it creates momentum that fuels further success. “It’s like pushing a snowball down a hill,” says one Habitat for Humanity volunteer. “At first you have to work at it, and it takes a lot of energy. But once it gets going, momentum builds and it starts rolling on its own.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Leading social change groups aim to solve the biggest problems plaguing our world: hunger, poverty, failing education, climate change. Just as they are driven to achieve broad social change, they have an unstoppable desire to create deep impact as well. They don't want simply to apply social Band-Aids, but rather to attack and eliminate the root causes of social ills. It's not enough for Habitat to build houses; it aspires to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the face of the earth. It's not enough for Teach For America to raise the test scores of students in its classrooms; it seeks to transform the entire educational system. It's not enough for City Year to build a few successful youth corps; it wants every young person to spend a year serving his or her community through national service.

Social change leaders that aim to simultaneously achieve results at both a broad level and at a deep systemic level are known as "social entrepreneurs." Like their counterparts in the private sector, social entrepreneurs relentlessly pursue results in the face of almost insurmountable odds, and they are driven to achieve fundamental change. As Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, says, "Social entrepreneurs are not content to merely give a man a fish, or even teach him how to fish; these entrepreneurs won't stop until they have revolutionized the entire fishing industry."

These types of leaders are rare, and the approaches they deploy to achieve maximum results are difficult to master. But we believe it is essential more groups adopt their approach--if we are to solve the pressing problems that plague our world. To achieve the greatest level of impact possible, the nonprofits need to embrace new ways of approaching social change. The best nonprofits transcend traditional organization boundaries to create greater good. Which means turning the focus away from the organization itself as the means of social change, and instead viewing the organization as a change-agent—a catalyst that works through larger networks and leverages all sectors of society for the greater good.

The implications for society are significant. If we are to truly maximize our chances of changing the world for the better, we must change the way leaders run, donors fund, and business and governments partner with nonprofit organizations. We believe that society is up for the challenge, as a number of forces are converging to create a unique opportunity for nonprofit organizations:

First, government has devolved responsibility to the states, and by extension, to the nonprofit sector. President Bill Clinton declared it was “the end of big government as we know it.” And while he and Vice President Gore were busy reinventing government, Newt Gingrich’s Devolution Revolutionaries were dismantling it, devolving power to state and local levels while de-funding many programs. As a result, an unprecedented level of responsibility for delivering social service programs has shifted to the social sector, and most nonprofits have struggled to rise to the challenge with increasingly limited funding in certain areas. The savvier nonprofits have pushed back, demanding more resources to do the job that once was the government’s, and meanwhile, the social sector as a whole has grown in power and influence.

We believe that to maximize impact, to become even greater forces for good, social change groups must be equipped to not just build their organizations, but build movements.

Second, business is becoming more socially-responsible: Forward-thinking businesses are looking for ways to become more environmentally- and socially-responsible. Not because they’re altruists, but because they see that it can benefit their bottom lines. The best nonprofit organizations

are showing them the way, by partnering with them and finding ways to help companies become stronger forces for good.

Third, philanthropists are seeking more bang for their buck. Philanthropy is no longer an act of noblesse oblige. These days, it's not as fashionable for donors to express their charitable impulses by buying a building and emblazoning his name on it at his alma mater. It's not the way the newly wealthy establish their legacies. They make their mark by the level of impact their wealth can achieve; they want a return on their charitable dollar. When Bill Gates commissioned his foundation to promote a healthier world, he didn't begin by naming a new hospital wing. He did it by starting out with the end-goal in mind: Eliminate diseases that kill millions in developing countries—diseases that are preventable and treatable. While it's too soon to tell whether his bet will pay off, Gates' strategy is a bellwether of the future of funding. It's the end of charity as we know it, and the beginning of impact-driven philanthropy.

Finally, the social sector is rapidly growing in size and influence. The nonprofit sector is the third largest contributor to U.S. GDP (behind retail and wholesale), currently valued at \$1 trillion. It grew faster than the GDP from 1983–1998, with the equivalent of 30,000 new organizations created each year. It includes more than a million organizations and employs up to 12.5 million people—more than the federal government. And its influence extends far beyond paid staff: While Americans may be “bowling alone”—as Harvard Professor Robert Putnam writes in his eponymous book about the breakdown of civil society—they are also volunteering in record numbers. According to annual Independent Sector surveys, more than a quarter of all Americans have consistently given their time to charitable causes in recent years, and the rates are remarkably higher than they were even two decades ago.

Social change groups operate at the nexus of these converging forces. They are uniquely positioned to harness the power that each sector of society has to advance the greater good. Government has devolved responsibility to the social sector. Business wants to do well while doing good. Donors

want more bang for their charitable buck. And citizen participation is on the rise. The situation represents a huge, unprecedented opportunity to create big change in the world. The stakes have never been higher, as more will be asked of nonprofits than ever before.

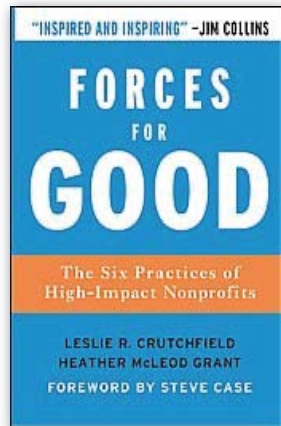
And here's how nonprofits leaders must rise to the challenge: We believe that to maximize impact, to become even greater forces for good, social change groups must be equipped to not just build their organizations, but build movements. They must see business as a potential force for change, rather than the enemy to be disdained or ignored. Nonprofits must also be prepared to advocate for reform, to jump into the policy fray. They must invest the time, money, and thought into creative ways to enlist vast armies of individuals as volunteers, not just treating them as sources of free labor or checks. And they must see the importance of nurturing networks of their nonprofit peers, treating other organizations not as competitors for scarce resources but rather as allies in the larger fight for social change. By doing these things, nonprofits can achieve greater results; this is what leads to wide scale social change.

What is the risk of not changing the way we change the world? We believe society is otherwise doomed to plod along with slow, incremental progress. We don't have time for incremental change—we need dramatic results, in geometric proportions, as soon as possible, if we are to solve the complex social and environmental problems that face us today.

This means that we must ask more of social change groups than ever. We need our nonprofits to become adept at working with and through other institutions to create more change than they could achieve alone—to achieve even greater good. Let's find points of leverage to ratchet up real results. Let's move from just building organizations, to seeding entire movements.

That's how to change the world. 

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Leslie Crutchfield is a managing director of Ashoka, a research grantee of The Aspen Institute's Nonprofit Sector and Philanthropy Program, and a philanthropic advisor to foundations and high net worth individuals. She has been featured as one of America's top leaders under 40 by *Newsweek* and *Self*, has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* as well as on NPR and PBS and other media. Heather McLeod Grant is an Advisor to the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, and to leading nonprofits and foundations. She has been published in the *New York Times, Inc.*, the *American Prospect*, and *Alliance*, and she has appeared on CNN and NPR, among other media.

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