A Unified Theory of Social Change

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MARCH 08, 2012

Most conversations about changing the world eventually degenerate into despair or, after a hands-in-the-air “well, anyway...” segue, they lapse into a conversation about something more practical or pressing. That’s because most discussions related to big change are about tactics rather than strategy at the scale of the question – and nothing’s more depressing than a tactical discussion when a strategic one is required. It creates the illusion of impossibility; makes us feel like we’re no match for the huge social challenges facing us. We start to doubt that they can actually be overcome.

If we want to change the world, we need a strategic plan. So here it is.

Definition of Terms
What do I mean by changing the world? How about ending homelessness, transforming our public education system, curing several major diseases, achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and eradicating a few other big social problems. That would work.

Timeline
Before those of us who are alive now are all dead.

Who’s We?
The humanitarian sector, also known as the nonprofit sector, for starters.
**Big Question**

Is the nonprofit sector even relevant? Isn’t it a drop in the bucket? Shouldn’t government tackle these challenges? Well, government has been trying, and that hasn’t worked. What about capitalism? Bill Clinton says that capitalism will solve the world’s great problems, not charity. Market forces have brought a flood of protease inhibitors to developing countries, he points out. Yes, but 1.8 million adults and children still die of AIDS every year. Capitalism has taken a run at ending poverty in the developed world, yet still, poverty in those countries hovers at 10% to 12%. And then there’s Africa. Even if capitalism could get 87% of the people to conditions above poverty lines, what about the rest? When one person in ten is left out of a solution, it isn’t a solution.

AIDS and poverty are the tip of the iceberg. Breast cancer continues to kill people at high rates, as does Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, suicide, and on and on. Capitalism can contribute to global solutions, but there remains a vital role for philanthropy and the humanitarian sector – one that’s as massive as the unmet need.

**A Unified Theory of Social Change**

Here’s the plan in three parts: First set daring, breathtaking, Apollo-like goals and deadlines for each problem we aim to tackle. Not 50 years off. Not 30 years off. Dates that people working today will still be around to be held accountable to.

Second, collaborate and communicate like there’s no tomorrow, using the collective impact model that brings all community players together, and aligns them on goals, and holds them accountable. And third, bring economic freedom to the nonprofit sector by employing multiplication philanthropy – that is, by investing in fundraising to dramatically increase the capital available to solve huge problems.

Gigantic goals, collective impact, and the liberation of the sector to achieve both. Converge those three things into one another like atoms in a particle accelerator and Boom! the world will start to change.
Let’s deconstruct that.

**Goals.** You can’t achieve a goal if you don’t have one, and across most of our big problems, we have nothing resembling real goals - not goals that everyone has signed onto and that have deadlines attached to them. Deadlines and goals consolidate vexing and unwieldy conversations. They bring urgency and accountability. They raise questions that weren’t being asked before. Think about this. We got to the moon in nine years in the days of almost no computing power, and now we say it would take at least 20 years to get back. Why? No goal and no deadline, plain and simple. Kennedy’s deadline made all the difference.

**Collective impact.** If I had a nickel for every time someone said “There are too many nonprofits,” I’d be on the Forbes list of wealthiest Americans. Yes, there are too many - and 97 new ones formed every day. Why? Because there are no economic incentives for mergers between organizations, and no communities of collaboration to discourage redundancy. But that’s not the worst of it. The worst of it is that the nonprofit sector is made up of countless solo players each working on little pieces of the puzzle. No one is coordinating the big picture on any given social problem. Daring goals will help to fix that, but what would be more helpful would be for the people who set the goals to start employing the model used by the Strive Network and the Strive Partnership to make big progress on public education in Cincinnati. That model incorporates shared goals and vision; evidence-based decision making; shared metrics; collaboration between nonprofits, business, and government; organization of all of the players into various committees that meet regularly and regular communication – every two weeks – among the committee leaders. Now that’s serious collaboration.

**Liberation of the sector.** You can have the loftiest goals in the world and the greatest systems for collaboration, but if the players cannot scale up to meet the size of the problem, we might as well all go home. We must dramatically increase the size of our efforts and resources. Organizations need to invest much more money in fundraising and growth strategies to transmogrify public support of these efforts. Philanthropists and institutional funders have to
start multiplying the power of their contributions instead of putting dollars directly into programs that multiply nothing and annihilate the multiplication potential of the capital. This will multiply the size of our humanitarian organizations.

That’s how we can change the world. It’s all proven stuff. It’s not rocket science. So let’s get on with it.

The Alternative
Keep doing what we’ve been doing, and keep getting what we’ve been getting.

Dan Pallotta is an expert in nonprofit sector innovation and a pioneering social entrepreneur. He is the founder of Pallotta TeamWorks, which invented the multiday AIDS Rides and Breast Cancer 3-Days. He is the president of Advertising for Humanity and the author of Charity Case: How The Nonprofit Community Can Stand Up For Itself and Really Change the World.