

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

*Informing and inspiring leaders of social change*

## NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

# When Good Is Not Good Enough

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This is an excerpt from the When Good Is Not Good Enough article.

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Drawing on our research and experience, we have identified four lessons most critical to achieving transformational change, starting with the most important: setting a long-term, bold goal. This becomes the North Star by which an organization makes decisions and allocates resources and the bottom line against which the organization measures its progress. Everything else flows from it.

***Focus: Set a Bold Goal*** | Solving a social problem at the magnitude it exists requires an organization to shift from focusing on short-term incremental progress to focusing on long-term transformational change. The latter is risky, hard to measure, and even harder to achieve, but it provides the inspiration that generates motivation, resources, and a new sense of what is possible. This means developing a goal so bold that achieving it means a social ill has been eradicated.

Malaria No More, for example, adopted the goal in 2006 to end all deaths from malaria in Africa by 2015. This bold goal—considered “crazy” by many inside and outside the malaria field—eventually inspired other organizations to join Malaria No More in achieving it. Since 2006, malaria deaths have fallen by one-third in Africa.

Similarly, in December 2004 the CEO of the [Institute for Healthcare Improvement](#), Donald Berwick, declared a bold goal and issued a challenge to hospital administrators: “Here is what I think we should do. I think we should save 100,000 lives. And I think we should do that by June 14, 2006—18 months from today. Some is not a number; soon is not a time. Here’s the number: 100,000. Here’s the time: June 14, 2006—9 a.m.” Hospitals that participated in the challenge saved an estimated 122,300 more lives than were projected during this time frame.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to create a sense of urgency and a reason to believe that the long-term bold goal can be accomplished. This can be achieved by setting shorter-term milestones and developing small-scale proof points. The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and its partners had a long-term goal to reduce tobacco use and its deadly toll. They also set a shorter-term goal of establishing FDA jurisdiction over tobacco, which they achieved in 2009, giving stakeholders faith that even bigger change was possible.<sup>7</sup>

The challenge with a bold goal is that, by definition, it aims at a target that is large, complex, and poorly understood. For many stakeholders at Share Our Strength and KaBOOM!, this was not what they’d signed up for. This shift has presented challenges for both organizations in their relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

At Share Our Strength, we recognized that the most important audience for this strategic shift was the person sitting next to us. If we couldn’t persuade, inspire, or explain our new goal to our co-worker, what chance was there of winning over others? So we spent weeks making sure that everyone at Share Our Strength was on the same page. We also recognized that we needed to integrate new staff with very different work styles and expertise into our existing team. We brought on former political campaign operatives accustomed to working with urgency in an environment of complexity and uncertainty. But we needed them to work with existing staff used to operating in a more planned and deliberate manner. At times, there were clashes.

In reviewing our partnerships in light of our new strategy, we identified a case of misalignment and made the hard decision to let a million-dollar corporate relationship expire. And some of our nonprofit partners had reservations about being held accountable for ending childhood hunger by 2015. But we accepted these as the costs of doing business in a new way.

At KaBOOM!, we now are in the process of convincing partners to adapt with us. Some partners are embracing the shift because they share the belief that active play—whether on the playground or not—leads to better outcomes for children and that playgrounds alone won't solve the problem. Others are not interested in empowering play advocates because the primary value they derive from partnering with us is a high-end employee volunteer engagement experience with a tangible product (playgrounds) to tout. Still others have expressed concern that focusing on play may dilute the citizen engagement and social capital that comes from building a playground in partnership with a community.

***Stakeholders: Open Up Your Circle*** | Transformational change requires an organization to look outside of its core group of true believers and put greater emphasis on mobilizing those less engaged. Every leader trying to solve a problem at the magnitude it exists must ask the simple question: Who has a role to play in solving this problem? The answer often includes cross-sector stakeholders, and those making transformational change are particularly adept at moving beyond their core champions and engaging seemingly unlikely partners. They excel at converting the “maybes”—by far the largest stakeholder group for any social goal—into “yeses.”

Jay Winsten of the Harvard School for Public Health, one of the architects behind the designated driver movement, demonstrated the value of opening one's circle by successfully engaging the Hollywood community in an effort to make the designated driver concept a social norm. Many Hollywood elites adopted the cause as their own, writing it into scripts of shows such as *Cheers*. The designated driver campaign played a significant role in the 24 percent decline in alcohol-related traffic fatalities between 1988 and 1992. The concept has since been passed down from one generation to the next.

Similarly, Malaria No More recruited as champions of the cause powerful influencers of public opinion, such as *American Idol*, one of the most popular television shows in the United States, and the FC Barcelona soccer team, one of the most celebrated brands across the globe, including in Africa, where 90 percent of malaria deaths occur. Malaria No More also identified Exxon Mobil Corp. as an ally, recognizing that malaria infection is the leading cause of worker absenteeism in key African oil-producing countries such as Angola, Chad, and Nigeria.

Share Our Strength started to subcontract with hundreds of small community nonprofits that could advance our campaign in schools and summer meals sites, and work with state legislatures, local school superintendents, and other community organizations. In some states No Kid Hungry campaigns are staffed by our own employees, giving us tighter control over their work and performance. In other states we provide the funds to embed campaign managers in existing community organizations. As a result, they sometimes face conflicting interests and have conflicting loyalties to agendas that are similar but not necessarily the same as ours. This requires compromise, acknowledging that our community partners have their own agenda as well as sharing ours.

At KaBOOM!, we're just now navigating the challenge of opening our circle, which will require us to embrace more decentralized activity. It's not always easy to do this when one's model has been built on a very centralized and controlled approach. Without standardization, we could not deliver a best-in-class volunteer experience or produce a safe, high-quality playground. But changing behavior and societal norms presents a very different challenge. It requires grassroots mobilization to empower individuals to create a new, more playful future for their communities in ways that are best for them, not directed by us.

For example, earlier this year KaBOOM! recognized more than 200 US cities, including Atlanta, as Playful City USA communities for their commitment to play-friendly policies. Facing declining revenues, Atlanta's proposed 2014 budget included a \$3 million cut to parks and recreation. Cynthia Gentry, the founding director of Atlanta Taskforce on Play and a longtime friend of KaBOOM!, immediately rallied play advocates in Atlanta to make the case for full funding, without any prompting from KaBOOM!. Our challenge with this type of mobilization is to overcome our well-intentioned instinct to engage with and help every single person who takes self-directed action. Our limited capacity and resources can go only so far, and we need others to take up the cause as their own if we ever hope to increase public sector support, catalyze comprehensive community-wide action, and create transformational change.

***Communication: Change the Conversation*** | Solving problems at scale requires an organization to do more than open up the circle of champions. At times, it requires leaders not just to join a conversation but to actually change the conversation. Changing the conversation can broaden the base of support for an idea by making it accessible to more people and interests or helping others better understand its connection to them.

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For example, in the late 1990s, the state of Florida’s “truth” campaign shifted anti-tobacco messaging to teenagers from the standard health-based frame of instructing teenagers on proper health behaviors to providing them with information to identify and assess false or manipulative tobacco advertising targeting them. The campaign equipped teens to fight back against “the bad guys.” One year after the campaign’s launch, smoking among Florida middle-school and high-school students had

declined by 19.4 and 8 percent, respectively. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicated that this was “the largest annual reported decline observed in the nation since 1980.”<sup>8</sup>

Leaders also need to be willing to change the conversation by asking for more money or new types of funding that may be needed to achieve bold goals. In the late 1990s, the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families founded the **Harlem Children’s Zone**, transitioning from providing various services to meet the needs of the local community to building and executing on a plan to end the cycle of generational poverty and send every child who lives in a 97-block area of Harlem to college. To accomplish this bold goal the organization needed to drastically increase its financial resources: from \$8.1 million in 1999 to \$25.9 million in 2000.<sup>9</sup> Instead of seeking funding program by program, Harlem Children’s Zone president Geoffrey Canada presented the organization’s bold goal along with a business plan that demonstrated how it would accomplish this goal. Canada explains, “We honestly would not take money that was not multiyear and it had to be unrestricted. You had to fund the plan, not a specific program.” This new conversation enabled Canada to win the attention of large national funders. And once he had secured funding from the first major new funder—the Soros Foundation—he used the accompanying credibility to open doors with others.

Share Our Strength made a concerted effort to change the conversation from one focused solely on hunger to one focused on the connection between hunger and health-care costs, educational achievement, and economic competitiveness. Our No Kid Hungry campaign collaborated with Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Ltd. on a project to identify and quantify the potential long-term impacts associated with children participating in the federal school breakfast program. The findings indicated that, on average, students who eat school breakfast achieve 17.5 percent higher scores on standardized math tests.<sup>10</sup> Linking hunger and school performance has increased interest among policy-makers and funders committed to education.

The Deloitte project, as important as it was in terms of changing the conversation, also exposed us to new scrutiny. We knew that social science projections can never be made with certainty and that people might challenge our findings. So there were extensive negotiations with and within Deloitte over what numbers could be used.

Many corporations partner with KaBOOM! because playgrounds are not controversial, but some of our partners are not necessarily passionate about the cause of play. When KaBOOM! started talking about giving kids the childhood they deserve, however, people often had a visceral reaction—based on personal experience (my kids are growing up too fast) or tragic news events (Sandy Hook). This new approach puts play at the center of the solution. At the same time, this change in the conversation has its challenges. We have a stronger point of view now on social issues and the role of play in solving them. For example, we believe that kids need balance but are spending too much time in front of a screen. With a stronger point of view, we risk alienating some corporate partners who might favor the use of technology by kids.

***Approach: Disrupt the Norms*** | As Thomas Edison famously quipped in response to a new employee's inquiry about laboratory rules, "There ain't no rules around here. We're trying to accomplish something!" To create transformational change, organizations must be willing to act as skeptics, questioning—and often disrupting—the norms among those affected by and those who affect a social problem. Norms are standards or patterns of social behavior that are typical or expected of a group. Ultimately, the reason to disrupt norms is to motivate a critical number of people to change their behavior, leading to a new norm, and then to advocate for standards or policies that will enforce the new norm.

For decades, the status quo of policing dictated that officers ignore petty crimes. Given limited resources, police in the mid-20th century were generally taught to ignore minor “quality-of-life” offenses like graffiti, panhandling, and broken windows and instead focus on serious or violent crimes and rapid response to 911 calls. In the 1980s, sociologists and political scientists began to advance the “Broken Windows” theory, which questioned traditional policing standards. The new approach held that disorderly behavior is

contagious and can accelerate community decay. The antidote is a “zero-tolerance” approach in which officers proactively stymie small offenses, an approach that former New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton embraced as he aimed to reduce crime in the city by 40 percent in three years. Under Bratton’s watch (1994-1996), murders fell by 47 percent, felonies by 39 percent, and theft by 35 percent. Public confidence in the New York City Police Department over that period rose from 37 to 73 percent.<sup>11</sup>

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At Share Our Strength, the norm for school breakfast had always been to offer it before the bell and in the cafeteria, which presented transportation and stigma barriers for many of the kids who needed it most. Experiences from forward-thinking schools across the country had demonstrated that alternative approaches to serving breakfast, including serving it after the bell and in the classroom, could increase breakfast participation. Share Our Strength funded many schools and districts to scale up these efforts through our No Kid Hungry campaign. We then collaborated with Deloitte to analyze the results in Maryland, which showed that in the schools where breakfast in the classroom was implemented, there was as much as a 7.2 percent decrease in chronic absenteeism. This data equipped us to speak to school leaders and policy makers about the educational benefits of alternative approaches to breakfast.

We have made a concerted effort to influence elected officials to pass legislation requiring high-need schools to adopt alternative models of providing breakfast. During the 2013 legislative session, three No Kid Hungry states successfully undertook three different policy efforts to expand school breakfast participation. In Colorado, for example, the new law will require more than 360 schools to offer breakfast after the bell, giving more than 80,000 additional children access to a daily breakfast.

But in some places the educators we expected to be allies initially were opponents. According to our 2012 survey of public school teachers, nine out of 10 teachers say that breakfast is very important for academic achievement. Teachers credit breakfast with increased concentration (95 percent), better academic performance (89 percent), and better behavior in the classroom (73 percent). Yet in schools where we introduced in-classroom breakfast, those same teachers initially opposed the program, citing perceived barriers such as increases in messes and pests, and decreases in instructional time. These changes can be disruptive when first implemented, but experience from schools across the country indicates that as students, teachers, food service staff, and custodians become accustomed to these new processes, the benefits become evident and the opposition turns to support. But it requires the fortitude to stick it out.

In pursuing its goal to ensure that children get the active play they need, KaBOOM! understands that building standard post-and-platform playgrounds is not adequate by itself to create widespread behavior change. Change of this magnitude requires that society place more value on active play and reinforce the expectation that children play in an active way every day. KaBOOM! views innovation in play-space design as a key lever for elevating the importance of active play and inspiring children to play more.

To accomplish this, KaBOOM! now attempts to drive the development and introduction of new play-space concepts in a playground industry whose innovation is stifled by safety regulations and the risk of litigation. Imagination Playground is a mobile play system made up of intentionally odd-shaped big blue blocks designed by renowned architect David Rockwell that taps into a child's natural curiosity and creativity. The blocks—designed to get children to play longer and come back more frequently—are a notable example of play-space disruption. KaBOOM! helped create a market for Rockwell's innovative design by partnering with foundations and corporations to grant Imagination Playground sets to centers, elementary schools, before- and after-school programs, children's museums, and other nonprofit organizations that serve low-income children, thus offering loose parts play as a lower-cost, high-value complement to the typical playground. This type of design and distribution innovation, which is more accessible to low-income communities because it is significantly less expensive and does not require permanent installation, is inspiring behavior change and disrupting the norm of inactivity in underserved communities.

Though we believe this type of disruptive innovation is critical, the challenge is to continue doing this while maintaining effective partnerships with leaders in the playground industry who help us to provide more and better play opportunities to children in low-income communities across the country. We are doing this by positioning these new programs as a way to create a

bigger market, not to compete with the existing playground market. Yet, we sense and recognize that challenging norms can be threatening to those who are well-established industry players.

### **Everything Is Impossible Until It Isn't**

When Share Our Strength and KaBOOM! began, we provided children with meals and places to play. But this has gotten us only so far, and we have seen the prospects for children, particularly those living in poverty, worsen. Now we have shifted course. In our own ways, we are seeking to give all kids the childhood they deserve. We understand that this is fraught with challenges and runs a high risk of failure. A large part of the current leadership challenge for us is to resist temptations to slide off strategy when the going gets tough, which it inevitably does after the early and relatively easy successes, or to chase funding that appears to be more readily available for popular but nonstrategic initiatives.

The purpose of this article is not to suggest that there is a formula for solving social problems or that every organization should follow our path. But we—as individuals, a sector, and society—cannot be satisfied with business as usual. Whether a change agent inside a community-based, national, or global organization, or in the public or private sector, we must commit to finding our unique place in creating transformational change. We must find the courage to aim for the harder-to-achieve long-term outcomes that will solve social problems. Good is not good enough when people are suffering. And, history has shown us—whether dramatically reducing tobacco use, alcohol-related traffic fatalities, or deaths from malaria—that everything is impossible until it isn't.

Community Wealth Partners has developed **two supplemental resources** to equip change agents interested in the concepts raised by this article: (1) a field guide for setting a bold goal and (2) a lifecycle tool to help change agents ask the powerful questions necessary for gauging and advancing their progress toward transformational change.