

Can Change Really Come to the Third Sector?

By Moshe Hecht

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The verdict is in: the people of the nonprofit world are ready for a radical shift. I'm not talking about some nicely-folded policy changes or yet another charity app – I'm talking about a complete *perestroika* of the existing nonprofit landscape. Everywhere I go, people are talking about just how fed up they are with the ancient practices, low wages, low overhead, and other pressing issues of our industry. But short of some angry re-tweeting, aggressive TED-talk sharing, and a few sporadic "Ice Bucket Challenges," is the change we all desire coming quickly enough? Are we losing that critical momentum that will end up with us marooned ashore with the rest of the washed up hashtags that have come and gone throughout the years?

Historically, the greatest revolutions and social shifts that have had staying power – from the Industrial Revolution and the Fall of Communism, to the Civil Rights and Feminist movements – all have several consistent characteristics that made them successful. If we can learn from them, we can hopefully usher in the much-needed change that we need for the nonprofit world. Allow me to highlight the three most critical factors:

#1 Hitting rock-bottom

Although many people within the particular movement itself may recognize the urgency of their cause, those immediately outside of it don't. This makes attempting to reach them difficult. Especially when the problem that some are attempting to remedy is either deeply ingrained or unknown. Unfortunately, this means that the direness of a movement will have to hit "rock-bottom," becoming so disastrous that people have no choice but to recognize that it's a problem.

Take the Civil Rights Movement, for example, and [look at just how many martyrs](#) had to give up their lives for people to realize what we now consider to be an obvious given: that oppressing people based on the color of their skin was unjust. Think about how many hundreds of people were lynched, murdered, and assassinated – even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself – for the country to come to terms with itself and its immoral ways.

We too, have hit rock bottom in many sectors of the nonprofit sphere: the UN estimates that [over 40 million people](#) have been forced into Modern Slavery, [264 million children](#) don't have access to basic education, and [795 million of all ages](#) don't meet healthy nutritional standards. Clearly, the field is ripe for change.

#2 Fearless Leadership

If I asked you to – off of the top of your head – name a fearless leader of the business world, you'd probably be able to rattle off a host of names, including pioneers like Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk. Chances are, you could almost definitely do the same for politics, albeit with the usual discrepancies that exist between ideology. What is doubttable, however, is if you could replicate that same feat for leaders of the nonprofit field, which is a huge problem.

Every effective movement has those who are willing to risk it all – whether it be vast sums of money, their public image, or even their life – for the sake of what they're representing. Think about what occurred recently with the #MeToo Movement – men and women were willing to risk their reputation and battle emotional and physical threats in their fight against deeply-entrenched and powerful figures like Harvey Weinstein. This is doubly true – particularly for women – in more impoverished and socially rigid countries, where victims who reveal their rape stories against powerful men are often severely injured, or even brutally murdered.

The nonprofit space needs similar figures, real warriors who are willing to attack their issues head-on, braving the blowback that they may receive. But in doing so, they bring much needed attention to the problems that they're trying to solve.

#3 Organized networks

Once we have leaders to represent our cases, we need organization; without people to lead, a leader is useless. It's common sense that when a group is fragmented, it's ineffective. To appeal once more to history, this was quite literally the case with the American Revolution – remember Benjamin Franklin's "[Join, or Die](#)" cartoon? Without the 13 colonies uniting together against Great Britain, it would have been impossible for America to achieve its independence, and great generals and the leaders like George Washington, Nathaniel Greene, and Charles Lee would have all struggled for naught.

We do actually see nonprofit organizations attempting to foster these connections, like with the Freedom Network and Liberty Asia for human trafficking. As a whole though, nonprofit movements still tend to be very disjointed. Greater centralization not only critically assures quicker communication, but a larger resource pool – both in terms of human and monetary capital – that is paramount if a cause wants to be effective.

Now, while I understand the issues our sector currently faces, I don't claim to have all the solutions to fix them. I do, however, recognize the problem solving power that we would have if we were to come together and take action within our own capacity as individuals. To start off, it doesn't even have to be large-scale – we can begin in our own communities, utilizing our own resources to start making even the slightest effort toward Third Sector unification. It's about slowly building that collective movement – whether you decide to follow and assist, or become that fearless leader that we so desperately desperately need – and gradually marching forward towards the future. Perhaps one day, if we all do our part, we – or maybe our kids and grandkids – can look back at this time and wonder what life was like before our game-changing “Impact Revolution.”

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