

Let's Bust the Lone Hero Myth: The Role of Collective Leadership in Systems Change

Reem Rahman, Michela Fenech, Nadine Freeman, Kris Herbst & Dani Matielo

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Yuwa, Inc., Jharkhand, India

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There's a myth that still needs to be busted.¹ It's the idea that the main way that social change happens is with a hero, that change won't happen until we have a

charismatic leader to show the way. Hollywood understands the power of this idea: stories about superheroes² are a billion dollar industry, making up almost half of the highest grossing films of 2017. And in the field of social innovation, the majority of conferences and awards are focused on recognizing the lone founder behind initiatives.

There is a certain truth behind this myth. In our work to support transformative ideas for social change at Ashoka, being the individual who is the originator and catalyzing force behind an idea has remained a core criteria for more than 40 years.³ And undoubtedly, social movements are galvanized by inspiring leaders who motivate others to take action.⁴

Collaboration and Collective Leadership Are Essential for Systems Change

However, Ashoka has observed that leading social entrepreneurs don't only create impact as lone heroes -- they need others -- and in many different ways. First, they need teams to achieve their impact; Ashoka Fellows are employing an average of 58 team members each. Second, they need to create roles and enabling environments for as many others as possible to also participate and lead in change. Our 2018 Global Fellows Study impact, for example, found that more than 77 percent of Ashoka Fellows are putting young people in charge of leading initiatives. Lastly, they need collaborations beyond their

organization in order to achieve impact at scale. More than 90 percent of Ashoka Fellows have reported creating systems change in markets and/or public policy, and creating open collaborations is a widely shared strategy: 90 percent of all Ashoka Fellows are openly encouraging other institutions or groups to replicate their idea in order to achieve their impact rather than solely focusing on growing the size of their organization.

Ashoka Fellows also have a high degree of peer-to-peer collaboration; Fellows average four collaborations with each other. Patrick Streubi of FairTradeUSA and Krishna Mishra of Ekutir are one example. FairTradeUSA and Ekutir have partnered to increase their impact by creating Bloom, a platform to better enable farmers to get fair prices for their produce by selling directly to local and international markets. The collaboration is yielding impact:⁵ on average, the communities where Bloom works are able to increase their yield by 75 percent, cut their food waste in half, and double their income.

The literature about large-scale collaborations (which covers topics such as collective impact⁶, multi-stakeholder initiatives,⁷ community collaboratives,⁸ inclusive markets,⁹ and cross-sector collaborations¹⁰) cites **five major motivations** for pursuing a collaborative approach for scaling up social impact despite how much more difficult it can be to coordinate across multiple organizations. Collaborative approaches to systems change are seen as:

- an effective way to tackle the nature of complex social problems. Certain social problems have the qualities of being large-scale, multi-sector, interconnected, and constantly changing, so they require solutions that have those same qualities as well;
- designed to remain accountable to having impact that reaches the entire community served;
- a more efficient way to optimize resources to overcome fragmented, "service delivery chaos"¹¹ by leveraging resources outside of just a single organization;
- an essential way to keep up with the hyper-pace of innovation and change and ensure sustainable value chains; and
- a more realistic way to ensure sustained impact because they pay deliberate attention to diversifying the stakeholders as co-owners.

There are, however, **two major mindset shifts** needed in order to take collaborative approaches to systems change. These include:

1. Shifting from traditional to collective leadership: According to Chris Underhill, founder of the global mental health initiative BasicNeeds: "Long gone are the days when one institution such as 'Save The Change' can go in and just make something happen that is top down." BasicNeeds, has served the mental health needs of more than 680,000¹² people through

collaborative partnerships with local government, ministries of help, and the formation of more than 600 locally-lead, self-help groups. A key to building such a distributed, impactful network was moving beyond a traditional, hierarchical leadership style where a few people take key decisions towards a more collective approach to leadership where many different people and organizations can take decisions and lead as well.

2. Moving away from strategic planning to emergence: Systems change -- creating a new and better pattern in society by tackling the root cause(s) of a problem -- requires recognizing that there isn't a single, static problem that is being tackled. Tackling a problem at greater scale means seeing how it is interconnected, shifting, and difficult to understand by just analyzing any one part. It requires an understanding of emergence -- seeing a whole pattern that can't be seen by looking at any one part -- but rather by looking at the interactions between many parts. Paul Born, founder of the Tamarack Institute, emphasizes how "the biggest tragedy [is] when people implement a strict planning process; they seem to shut down people's ability to imagine and explore." He instead supports the formation of networks of organizations that are not just creating plans, but are also deliberate about listening, learning, and adjusting decisions on a regular basis based on engaging all those who care and are affected by the


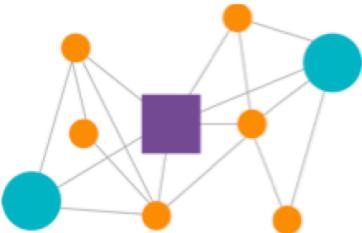
targeted issue. As a result, Tamarack Institute has reduced poverty for more than 250,000 families¹³ via a network of organizations committed to reducing poverty in more than 50 Canadian cities.

Opening up and Letting Go

One of the most important considerations for social entrepreneurs who are contemplating collective leadership is determining how much they are willing to open up their model and let go of controlling the full outcome and its execution in order to enable others to also lead, shape, and deliver on achieving a shared vision. This requires questioning and innovating in every dimension of leadership, including organizational structures, decision making, beliefs about people's capacity, resources and information management, how learning happens, and the role of empathy and conflict resolution.

Raj Jayadev exemplifies¹⁴ this shift. He is a part of a growing national movement to advance the concept of "participatory defense" where families and communities most impacted by mass incarceration in the United States can effectively participate in the criminal defense process and transform the landscape of power in the court system. So far, networks of community members have established hubs applying this model in more than four states, and collectively they "have saved nearly 4,000 years of potential prison terms for defendants through

cases won or reduced sentences.”¹⁵ Raj did not start more chapters of his organization with him at the center as the E.D., but instead uses an open model that works to train and support local cities to start their own chapters, with the community organizations that were already in place, allowing them to make their own decisions. Instead of becoming a large, chapter organization, the hubs form a National Participatory Defense Network.

Leadership Dimension	 <p data-bbox="374 898 677 931">Traditional Leadership</p>	↔	 <p data-bbox="1002 898 1289 931">Collective Leadership</p>
1. Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Top-down hierarchy		<input type="checkbox"/> Networks of Teams <i>(Teams may self-organize, take decisions quickly, and adjust rules according to new situations)</i>
2. Decision Making	<input type="checkbox"/> Centralised Decision-Making <i>(decisions are made at the top levels of the hierarchy)</i>		<input type="checkbox"/> Distributed Decision Making <i>(decisions are made at many levels, by whoever is most capable. Decision makers might rotate. Consultation may be a necessary step.)</i>
3. Beliefs About People's Capacity	<input type="checkbox"/> People need instruction to do the right thing. They continuously need		<input type="checkbox"/> People need to be given guiding principles for their work, the support to grow, and be trusted.

	<p>this guidance.</p>		<p>Over time, they need less support to quickly solve problems.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> People have capacity to work in teams <input type="checkbox"/> People understand themselves and their impact on others <input type="checkbox"/> People have capacity to sense when they are well-placed to lead or to follow
4.Resources & Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Siloed information and resources 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Transparency - Resources and information is centralised to facilitate communication and to help ensure teams have the information they need to make decisions <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligence is held in the collective <input type="checkbox"/> Strong focus on communication and integration
5.Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Mastery requires official certification or seniority <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge is valued most when it comes from educational institutions <input type="checkbox"/> Learning is pre-structured, it happens through predictable content <input type="checkbox"/> Experts teach 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Mastery requires life-long learning <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge comes through lived experience as well and can come at any age <input type="checkbox"/> Learning is organic, it happens through real-time experimentation and iteration <input type="checkbox"/> Everyone has a way to contribute to learning
6.Empathy & Conflict Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Leaders take unilateral decisions to solve a conflict or teams get stuck trying to reach consensus <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict is avoided as people are ill-equipped to handle conflict constructively 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> People can have their voices fully heard and considered before a decision is taken or there is a clear and fair resolution process. <input type="checkbox"/> People are equipped to be empathetic, embrace difference and conflict productively, and apply conflict resolution principles.

Figure 1: The Collective Leadership Spectrum for System Change

The following is an overview of collective leadership as a way to enable many more participants to quickly collaborate towards systems change. It is offered as a spectrum because it is not binary: no one approach is

necessarily "bad" or "good;" the approach depends on specific context.

A more careful look at one of the largest networks of social entrepreneurs shows us the same insight as a more careful viewing of why the Avengers may be one of the most popular of the superhero films: there's a story more powerful than just the lone hero; collaborations -- and the collective leadership needed to achieve them, are central to the most effective pathways for social change.

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Author bio

Reem Rahman is the Director of the Ashoka Changemakers Learning Lab, dedicated to helping anyone with an idea for social change succeed in making a difference. She is passionate about co-creating open-source tools for learning and designs products to increase collaboration, impact, and sustainability. These have included reports on trends in social innovation such as "Youth Unstuck: Innovations for Youth Livelihoods and Leadership." Reem has a Master's degree in Management Research from the University of Oxford focusing on strategy, innovation, and entrepreneurship.