

The Depletion of Social Sector Leaders: How to Inspire Change Through our Daily Actions

Amanda Neely 24 April 2017

Have you have ever been to a gathering hosted by a nonprofit group? Maybe it was a rally, an interest meeting, or a fundraiser? I've been to many of them myself.

What I've noticed at almost all of them is two things: (1) the people there are very passionate about their causes and (2) they often serve bad coffee. I'm talking about coffee where the farmers who grew it are living in extreme poverty or coffee grown on large plantations and harvested by migrant workers paid pennies for a hard day's work. Maybe serving this kind of coffee doesn't happen at a fundraiser – that's when they bring out the fine china and gourmet food and drink. I'm talking about rallies, interest meetings, panels, and presentations. That's when you see the Folgers in a percolator with Styrofoam cups, plastic stirrers, and fake creamer.

When nonprofits serve bad coffee, it creates a dissonance for me. How can these do-gooders, who seem to really care about making the world a better place through their cause, not consider the impact of the coffee they choose

and the cups they serve it in? Is their budget so important that they aren't willing to spend just a little bit extra so that, at the same time they are doing good in one area, they aren't doing harm in another.

Let me tell you about something else that creates dissonance for me. I am saddened when I see people with great potential to do good and change the world get jaded or burned out. I can't tell you how many social change leaders I've met on the brink of a break down from being stressed and depressed. The top three factors I see contributing to this are loneliness, compassion fatigue, and competitiveness. Some people with the greatest potential to make the world better aren't reaching that potential because they get overwhelmed and start to believe that change isn't possible.

That makes me very sad because I can empathize. Brandon, my life and business partner, and I have been on the edge of this too many times over the last six years of running a mission-driven business. We almost quit because of these same reasons: loneliness, compassion fatigue, and realizing that many of those who we thought would be great partners turned out to be unfriendly competition.

Instead of this harsh reality, let's imagine a world where those who do good are passionate about their cause but do not sacrifice the wellbeing of others to achieve their mission. Imagine a world where those who do good are

sustained with an understanding community of mentors and supporters, the space to practice self-care, and the collaboration of their peers.

To put it another way, imagine a world more conscious and supportive - where those who need something to live for are connected to those who just need something to live, and where those who give of themselves for others also receive plenty of backing. I call this a "**sustainable community.**" It's a world that is economically sustainable, socially sustainable, **and** environmentally sustainable. This is my best definition of true community. Connecting those who want to change the world with those who need the world to change.

Overflow Coffee Bar, L3C has made it our mission to create a sustainable community in the South Loop of Chicago. Specifically, our mission statement is "***to inspire a genuine and local community of people who change the world with their purchasing power, time, and talents.***" We located our social enterprise in the South Loop because the loneliness and lack of meaning and purpose here broke our hearts. We are bringing people together and helping them change the world by connecting them to each other and to those who experience monetary poverty.

Back during the height of the Occupy movement, I was watching some video of the protesters. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the protesters carrying a venti cup

with a green insignia on it. For the next little while, Brandon and I vented to each other. We said things like “How can this protestor not understand that his money just went to the big guys he’s protesting against?” and “I wonder if he paid for that drink with a credit card from one of those large banks that just got bailed out” and most importantly, “What if all these protesters started practicing ethical economics and shifted their money toward local, small businesses? What if, long after the protest is finished, they were still voting and protesting with their dollar bills?” While, I’ve been impressed with some of those protestors from the Occupy Movement who have gone on to do just this very thing with activities like “Buy Nothing Day” on Black Friday, there is still a need for the rest of the community to match their daily actions to their ideals.

At Overflow, we are bringing ethical economics straight to the consumer through carefully sourcing and crafting our offerings. We also get the chance to educate people about the purchasing choices they make each and every day. Even if we never enter a brick and mortar store, where our money is housed and who we owe money to can make a big difference. As it becomes more widespread to be conscious about what we do with our waste, what we eat, and how we treat others, I hope we’ll be more conscious of how we use our money in all areas – spending, saving, and being in debt. Where and how we spend our dollar, bills matter.

Maybe you're with me so far. You're thinking – "Yes, doing good while not doing harm, creating support for world changers, being more conscious of what I do with my money, I get it." Then some of you go on, "But does it actually change anything?" That is a very valid question. Making a positive difference in the world can feel overwhelming. Do the small choices you make each day actually matter?

This is where you'll be able to tell that I'm an optimist.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is often quoted as saying, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." My optimistic side likes to say the inverse, "Positive things happening anywhere can result in positive things happening everywhere." I call this the Overflow Principle. It's where Overflow Coffee Bar gets its name.

The Overflow Principle is represented by a fountain. We're all self-interested so at the top of the fountain are you, your close friends, and family. Positive things happening with you, your close friends, and family overflow into positive things happening right around you – in your neighborhood and at your workplace. Which in turn, overflow into positive things happening in your larger area – the city. Positive things happening in our city can result in positive things for our state, for our nation, and the overflow continues to the entire world. Then, we get to my favorite part of fountains: their feedback loop. Positive things happening all over the world return to you and your

close friends and family. It's a virtuous cycle of sustainable community. The Overflow community is an example of this fountain. We started with just the two of us and our positive impact continues to expand and return to us with our customer base that now included over 5,000 individuals in 2016.

Ethical economics plays a huge role in this because we live in a world that is increasingly economically integrated and interdependent. If you looked at your day by the countries you touch – where your food comes from, where the raw materials in your clothes start, who assembles your clothes, where the fuel to power your car or the bus or your home comes from – most likely we all touch every continent every day except for Antarctica. I don't think even ice cream can be manufactured there.

This is where we get to the crux of the issue...

#SmallMatters. Or you can see it in Overflow's slogan, "Changing the world one cup at a time." Yes, every dollar bill you or your favorite nonprofit spends matters. Yes, every social change leader you support matters. Yes, every cup of coffee you drink matters. It matters to the planet and the people who live here.

Our individual capacities to change the world are limited. But our communal capacity to change the world is unlimited. Especially, when we learn and grow by appreciating our differences. Margaret Mead, a famous cultural anthropologist, is quoted as saying, "Never doubt

that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I would add, "And the change is even more dramatic when the small group of thoughtful, committed citizens is made up of people very different from one another." What better place to bring diverse people together than a friendly, neighborhood coffee house?

This is how Overflow started. Brandon and I started learning the story of the 23 million coffee farmers living in extreme poverty and changed our purchasing habits. Then, we started asking how we could help others experience the same benefits we did from knowing the impact of our purchases. The dream of Overflow started to fill in from there.

What I'm saying is that whatever change you want to see in the world - greater peace, less hunger, safer neighborhoods, whatever it is - you have the power to help make it happen! Stop waiting for someone else - a politician or a businessperson - to do it for you. You have agency to start the transformation within yourself, your close friends and family, and the people in your neighborhood. When you have this as your foundation, you'll find a way to generate money and make it sustainable. Nothing will be able to hold you back.

This is our theory of change. One person commits to their role in creating sustainable community and then sharing it with others. This means change can start with selling one

cup of sustainable coffee and grow exponentially from there.

If you would like to find out more, we invite you to visit us in Chicago at 1550 S State Street. You can also find us on the web at www.overflowcoffeebar.org. We also love to help entrepreneurs start and grow their own sustainable communities. If you would like to schedule a time to talk on the phone or over a cup of coffee. Do not hesitate to reach out via info@overflowcoffeebar.org.

Amanda Neely Bio

Amanda Neely is co-founder and co-owner of Overflow Coffee Bar, L3C. Amanda and her husband opened Overflow Coffee Bar in 2011 as a social enterprise focused on achieving a social mission prior to making a profit. Amanda is a knowledgeable entrepreneur with experience in creatively solving the challenges inherent to growing and starting a business. Amanda loves to share her experiential knowledge as a certified life and business coach through overflowyourpossibility.com.

