



## Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review™

### **Partnering for High Impact - Part 1 of 2**

Wednesday, December 12, 2007 - Cassandra O'Neill

---

Contributed By Cassandra O'Neill, MA

Do you want to increase the impact of your nonprofit organization? What if the way to do this was through developing powerful relationships with individuals and organizations outside of your own? Part 1 of this article will explore recent research by Heather McLeod Grant and Leslie R. Crutchfield on the key practices used by high-impact nonprofit organizations. Part 2 will explore the skills necessary to develop and sustain powerful partnerships that result in high impact. Are you asking yourself what can we **only** do together that we can't do alone? If not, now may be a good time to start.

McLeod and Crutchfield's findings were published this fall. There were cover stories on the findings in both the Fall 2007 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and the October 4, 2007 *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Their book *Forces for Good* describes their findings in more detail.

#### **Partnering is the Key to High Impact**

They found that the key to creating high-impact nonprofit organizations is working with partners outside of the organization. Collaboration, and not competition, is the root of success and high impact. Competition is currently the predominant mindset or paradigm in the social sector. Nonprofits see themselves as competing with others for what are perceived as "scarce" resources. These resources are predominantly government, foundation, and corporate funding, and to a lesser extent individual donors. The question driving the behavior of organizations competing is, "How can we be better than others?" However, Grant and Crutchfield found that partnering for high impact requires a different question, one such as "How can we be better WITH others?"

## **Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits**

What follows is a brief description of the six practices that were used by the 12 high-impact nonprofits they studied, all of whom answered the question “How can we become better together?”

*Serve and Advocate.* Partnering with others was essential to doing both of these well and led to high impact.

*Make Markets Work.* By partnering with corporations these high-impact nonprofits were able to shift corporate practices and work jointly with businesses toward a social good. Many also operated earned income ventures which provide stable funding for their work.

*Inspire Evangelists.* By connecting people with a way to act on their passions, high-impact nonprofits generated powerful and enthusiastic supporters who recruited others.

*Nurture Nonprofit Networks.* These nonprofits helped their peers succeed by continuously asking how they could help others benefit from their own organization’s strengths and knowledge, and this resulted in increased value for all.

*Master the Art of Adaptation.* Constantly assessing the results of their actions, gathering input from a wide group, and applying what they learned in a meaningful way led to high impact.

*Share Leadership.* Strong leadership was present in these nonprofits who had strong a.) Executive Directors, b.) second in commands, and c.) boards. Their benches are deep, which allows for collective leadership to emerge and promotes sustainability.

## **Efficiency is Not a Path to High Impact**

One of the most important findings in Grant and Crutchfield’s research seems almost counter intuitive. Efficiency is not a path to high impact. This may seem surprising because it means that much of both the conventional wisdom and the practices that are widely promoted in the social sector do not lead to increased impact. They found that you can’t get high impact from efficiency alone.

In the last decade there has been an enormous proliferation of new nonprofits often focusing on a single issue. This has occurred in spite of the fact that there has been no expansion of government or foundation funding to support these new organizations. In fact, there has been a decrease in funding available to nonprofits from government agencies and foundations. The huge growth in single issue organizations without an increase in available funding has led to problems. One of the most obvious problems is that it is harder for all organizations to get their messages through to potential and current supporters because of all the noise. This can negatively affect an organization’s ability to get funding. What is the solution? Mergers are what are commonly touted as a solution.

## **Is Focusing on Mergers the Right Solution, or is it Too Myopic?**

If by partnering you can't do something different from what you can do on your own, then the only possibility is efficiency. If we are both doing something similar, we can possibly do it more efficiently by doing it together. This is some of the thinking behind mergers. Mergers can lower competition for funds, and create efficiencies in bringing money in and spending it. But not always. We have all seen mergers that fell apart or resulted in the creation of more new problems than they solved. Even if every organization did merge, if the mindset that led to everyone doing their own thing isn't changed, will things be any better? What if the continued growth in new narrowly focused organizations is itself an indicator that the social sector as a whole does not have the skills necessary to partner effectively?

## **What Should You Do If You Find Yourself in a Hole?**

Stop digging. Maybe a better solution is to stop digging, to stop working individually, to start more narrowly focused organizations and programs and to start partnering instead. If by working together we can do something that we couldn't do by ourselves, then something more than efficiency is possible. This will require changes on everyone's part -- the existing organizations who are rebuffing all interested persons that approach them with new ideas, and the persons who either don't make an effort to reach out to existing players or are rebuffed by them and then decide to do it themselves. And most of all, funders. The way funding is currently distributed contributes to the lack of partnering. Asking people to partner to get grants is NOT a solution. All that does is give people skills in dividing up pots of money to fund new and unsustainable programs.

How do you partner with others in a way that creates high impact rather than just efficiency? What value can partners add and what knowledge, skills, and attitudes do people and organizations need to move beyond efficiency and create high-impact partnerships? These are the questions that will be explored in [Part 2](#).

## About the Contributor



### **Cassandra O'Neill, MA:**

Cassandra O'Neill, MA is a Co-Founder of Wholonomy Consulting LLC located at [www.wholonomyconsulting.com](http://www.wholonomyconsulting.com). Our mission is to assist organizations turn their good ideas into great results. We use a blend of approaches which include: Appreciative Inquiry, Cognitive Coaching SM, Open Space Technology, and Polarity Management TM.

Ms. O'Neill has over 20 years of experience with program development, implementation, and evaluation. She has worked as a consultant to non profit and for profit organizations, government agencies, and colleges and universities for the last six years. She has expertise in workforce development, health care, social services, and education. As a consultant, she has worked with over 70 organizations, and raised more than \$60 million in grant funding. Prior to consulting, she worked for a national social service agency, state government agencies in New Jersey and California, the National Governors' Association, and Rutgers University.

Contact: [cassandraoneill@comcast.net](mailto:cassandraoneill@comcast.net)

---

### **Publisher:**

CharityChannel LLC  
30021 Tomas St., Suite 300  
Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688-2128 USA  
+1 949 589-5938  
Or contact us on-line at <http://charitychannel.com/rapid-reply>

## Copyright

*Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review*(tm) is a domestic and international trademark of CharityChannel LLC. Copyright © and Trademark ™ 2007 CharityChannel LLC. All rights reserved. Article or item is copyright © 2007 by the contributor.

## Reprints

All articles and other items on the CharityChannel web site is copyrighted by CharityChannel, by the contributor, or both. As a subscriber to the CharityChannel eNewsletters, you have permission to:

- Print any article or item for your own file or reference purposes.
- Link from your site to any article or item we publish
- Forward an article or item to 10 or fewer of your colleagues by email

However, if you would like to reproduce and/or distribute a CharityChannel eNewsletter article or item electronically or in print for uses other than those listed above, you must follow the steps below to secure permission:

### How to Quickly Get Reprint Permission

CharityChannel does not charge for reprints. There are three simple steps to getting permission to reprint an article from a CharityChannel eNewsletter.

**Step 1:** Utilizing the form at <http://charitychannel.com/reprints>, tell us how you propose to use the reprint.

**Step 2.** If you wish to reprint an article, get the contributor's written permission (i.e. by email). Each eNewsletter contains a bio and contact information about the author and/or a link to the contributor's web site. Sorry, but we cannot help you trace down a contributor. There are too many of them, and besides, you have the same information we do -- the bio on the article page!

**Step 3:** Provide attribution to CharityChannel and to the contributor as follows:

**Copyright © Cassandra O'Neill. All rights reserved.**

**This article is reprinted with permission from CharityChannel.com and the author of this article. The author holds the copyright to the article. To receive the entire issue by email each week, visit <http://charitychannel.com/enewsletters> and use the subscription form. To seek permission for reprints, visit <http://charitychannel.com/reprints>. For more information, contact CharityChannel at <http://charitychannel.com/rapid-reply>."**