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Bolder Goals, Bigger Breakthroughs

by Amy Celep, Bill Shore & James Siegal May 1, 2019

Nonprofits that set their sights higher can achieve more.

The past year has brought a chorus of cries challenging the status quo in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in pursuit of greater impact. Authors including Rob Reich and Edgar Villanueva challenged philanthropy to rethink power and privilege, while Leslie Crutchfield and Charlene Carruthers lifted up lessons from a range of social movements that nonprofit leaders can apply in their efforts. These and other authors are calling for folks working on the frontlines of social change to rethink their approaches and set their sights higher to achieve more meaningful outcomes. We could not agree more.

In 2013, we co-authored an article called “When Good is Not Good Enough.” In it, we argued that the sector needs to shift from setting modest goals that provide short-term results to setting bold goals that, while harder to achieve, tackle the root of social problems. We urged nonprofits to think bigger and strive for transformational change— achieving outcomes that align with the magnitude of the issues they seek to address. [Share Our Strength](#) set out to end childhood hunger in America by 2015, [KaBOOM!](#) aspired to create the conditions in which all kids get the play they need to become successful and healthy adults, and [Community Wealth Partners](#) aimed to help dozens of organizations set bolder goals and strategies for achieving them.

Six years later, we have not put ourselves out of business. The complex challenges we and our colleagues aim to solve every day persist. So what good is it to aim high? Was thinking big the right thing to do?

For all of us, aiming high led to breakthrough strategies that allowed us to achieve more than we would have otherwise. Setting bold goals and holding ourselves accountable to them pushed us to explore new approaches, foster new types of connections, and, most importantly, achieve greater impact.

Here, we offer reflections on our original three recommendations—setting a bold goal, opening your circle, and changing the conversation—to make significantly greater progress.



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Setting a Bold Goal

As we described in our 2013 article, “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.”

For Share Our Strength, setting a bold goal of ending childhood hunger in America by 2015 led to a complete overhaul of our strategy. We shifted from making individual grants to organizations focused on addressing hunger, to serving as a catalyst and coordinator of a state-by-state strategy through the No Kid Hungry campaign. This new strategy helped us work in networked ways to create deeper and more-sustained impact (see our “opening your circle” section below).

Since 2010, we have built partnerships with dozens of diverse partners, including corporations and a network of state and local government agencies, including municipal school districts and governor’s offices. A few years after setting our bold goal, for example, we began a long-term partnership with the National Governor’s Association that has helped make childhood hunger a priority for US governors on both sides of the aisle. One concrete result happened last March: Governor Cuomo supported, and the New York state legislature’s approved, a budget that includes funding for high-need public schools to offer breakfast after the start of the school day and that earmarked \$7 million to support the implementation.

A more-explicit focus on transformational change also meant that we needed to better coordinate efforts within states and build bipartisan political support for our cause. Rather than trying to cover the waterfront on our own, we began lending communications, data collection, planning, and advocacy support to groups addressing hunger—a move that has led to increased public funding and legislative wins in many states. In 2017, for example, after three years of work with our partner United Way of King County, Washington became the seventh state to pass a law giving up to 30,000 more kids access to school breakfast each morning. This demonstrates that our strategy is working, and that momentum for breakfast legislation is growing from coast to coast.

Pursuing our bold goal has also meant making bold changes to our organization’s internal systems. Since 2013, our staff size has increased by 34 percent, and our revenue has grown 12 percent annually. Our funding streams have significantly evolved as well. In the past six years, we’ve seen revenue from the corporate sector grow by 44 percent.

While our network has not ended childhood hunger, we’ve made a significant dent in it. Today, one-third fewer children are living with hunger since the start of the No Kid Hungry campaign, and together with our partners, we’ve provided more than 1 billion meals to children since the No Kid Hungry campaign began nine years ago. We’re also transparent with our stakeholders about the reasons why it is taking us longer to achieve our bold goal than we thought. This honesty, combined with the strong results we have achieved so far, has made our funders and other partners willing to stick with us through the longer haul.

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Opening Your Circle

In our original article, we wrote, “Transformational change requires an organization to look outside of its core group of true believers and put a greater emphasis on mobilizing those less engaged.”

At Community Wealth Partners, we’ve seen both national and local organizations strategically forge new, cross-sector relationships that have truly transformed the way they work. This approach has made a difference for large national organizations, such as Share Our Strength as we’ve described, as well as smaller organizations that are locally focused, such as Miriam’s Kitchen.

When Miriam’s Kitchen set a bold goal of ending chronic homelessness in Washington, DC, it shifted its approach from direct services focused on meeting the needs of individuals to one focused on advancing change at the systems level. Miriam’s Kitchen knew success would depend on greater coordination among the various organizations and agencies working to address homelessness in the city, so it worked to foster collaboration.

In the beginning, opening Miriam’s Kitchen’s circle required that it continually meet with local government and other organizations to explain its shift in strategy and its capacity for systems-level work. This continual outreach eventually evolved into some powerful collaborations. First, Miriam’s Kitchen worked with other organizations serving chronically homeless individuals to create a coordinated entry system that both streamlines the process for getting on a list to receive permanent supportive housing and gives priority attention to individuals who are most vulnerable. Today, 115 organizations in the city participate in this system. Second, Miriam’s Kitchen engaged local government agencies to help the city strengthen its strategy for addressing homelessness in partnership with nonprofits, and to help advocate for more funding for permanent supportive housing. The coalition it helped build not only created a shared vision for how to end chronic homelessness in Washington, DC, but also secured \$112 million in additional city funding over five years in vouchers and services for permanent supportive housing.

Miriam’s Kitchen’s long-term, systems-level approach has also attracted new funders, and by working more collaboratively, it has opened up opportunities to launch new programs and services, as well as new sources of public funding to support those services. For example, Miriam’s Kitchen has launched its own permanent supportive housing program, a six-person street outreach team, and a new program focused on helping people access public benefits faster. All of these programs are driving greater progress toward its bold goal and are not things the organization would have considered taking on before it proactively opened its circle.

A bold goal also requires that organizations open their circle to those closest to the problem. Miriam’s Kitchen has been intentional about engaging its chronically homeless guests in decision-making and day-to-day operations. For example, collaborative working groups that include guests guide many programming decisions across the organization, and two guests per year participate in an advocacy fellowship program. Giving guests the knowledge and tools they need to advocate for themselves has led to some legislative and funding successes; recently the DC Council approved a pilot program to make public restrooms available in the city. The People for Fairness Coalition, an independent organization that began at Miriam’s Kitchen, led the campaign.

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From 2008 to 2018, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness in Washington DC decreased by nearly 30 percent. As Miriam’s Kitchen embarks on its next strategic plan, its leaders will continue to explore the role the organization can play in coordinating and catalyzing collaboration among the many agencies and organizations that can help it reach its bold goal.

Changing the Conversation

Our 2013 article also said, “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.”

When KaBOOM! set out to reframe play space as a necessity, rather than a “nice to have,” for kids and the places where they live, we realized that focusing solely on one ultimate, bold goal does not necessarily illuminate a clear pathway for getting there or create an urgency for change.

Changing the conversation to focus on the nature of the large-scale problem—namely, decades of disinvestment in under-resourced communities around the United States, where public systems have struggled to provide kids with the opportunity to play—has gone hand-in-hand with changing how we go about the solution. Historically, we’ve focused on securing funding from partners and matching it to specific community organizations that need a new play space. But while this approach—which we continue to use—provides deep, hyper-local value, it’s not enough to reach the 14 million kids in poverty at scale. Today, we also take a systemic approach by working with schools, housing authorities, parks, and other public systems. This system-level work is complex, difficult, and non-linear. In many cases, municipal systems lack community trust and confidence, because disinvestment in these systems has exacerbated the gap between kids who have access to play spaces and those who don’t, disproportionately impacting kids of color.

We’ve also learned that creating a sense of urgency among public-sector decision makers and private supporters means connecting our work to broader issues of inequity. For example, like many cities across the United States, Baltimore has deep disparities in opportunities for kids to play, with kids of color much less likely to grow up in neighborhoods with adequate play spaces. The response that followed the death of Freddie Gray in 2015 highlighted racial inequity and drew increased community support for our work. Before April 2015, KaBOOM! helped create 16 play space projects in Baltimore over the preceding 15 years. In the two years that followed, KaBOOM! and these communities—including where Freddie Gray grew up—completed 21 play spaces. And between 2015 and 2018, this new work brought close to \$5 million in investment from a variety of sources, including significant catalytic funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and The CarMax Foundation. Many of our projects since 2015 have been in partnership with Baltimore City Public Schools, a chronically underfunded system that has struggled to invest in elementary school playgrounds—something many parents in wealthier districts take for granted. The initial sense of urgency in 2015 and ensuing work opened up the possibility of tackling long-term needs across the entire school system. Parent-Teacher Associations, school districts, and corporate and philanthropic supporters are seeing the impact playgrounds have on kids, schools, and neighborhoods, fueling the belief that together we can accomplish even more.

Engaging in public-private partnerships has significantly impacted who is funding our work. Whereas more than 90 percent of our funding used to come from corporate partners, last year, during a period of growth, 27 percent came from foundations interested in supporting kid and community

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outcomes—particularly through scaled solutions that can change the long-term trajectory of public systems. The community leaders we've worked with report an 87 percent increase in kids' playing. Meanwhile, 86 percent report improved community relations and attitudes, and 91 percent report that a new play space provided a safe haven for kids and families.

Creating urgency by addressing disparities at the municipal-system level also forced us to confront inequity within our own organization. Even the most well-intentioned organizations and individuals operate within, and often reflect, systems and structures that have perpetuated inequity. Pursuing a bold goal requires a willingness to confront our own fallibilities and shortcomings, and the resolve to keep moving forward in the face of pain, resistance, and brutal facts. Even when you control for socio-economic status, kids of color have less access to play spaces than their white counterparts. With the help of experts in the field and inspiration from Angela Glover Blackwell's "The Curb-Cut Effect," we have begun to apply a racial equity lens to our work—both our internal policies and practices, and our externally facing programmatic efforts. This focus is leading to opportunities to partner long-term with municipal systems, with the goal of closing the racial equity gap in access to (and outcomes from) great, safe places to play.

Setting Our Sights Higher

We still believe that "thinking big" unlocks new ways of working and yields greater outcomes—though it will look different for organizations of different sizes, structures, and missions. Indeed, not every organization should focus explicitly on root causes; immediate needs persist. However, we believe that every organization can think bigger about the role it can play in large-scale social change, and that opening your circle and changing the conversation can help draw stronger connections between symptoms and root causes, and rally broader support.

The social issues nonprofits seek to address demand that we continually question what we can do to have a bigger impact. As these stories show, aiming high can launch organizations on a different trajectory that allows them to build broader support and ultimately achieve greater outcomes. Setting a bold goal, opening your circle, and changing the conversation are critical actions for nonprofits and foundations to achieve the outcomes we hope to see.

Amy Celep (@AmyCelep) is the CEO of [Community Wealth Partners](#) (@WeDreamForward), where she leads the team's efforts to support partners in solving problems at the magnitude they exist.

Bill Shore (@billshore) is the founder and executive chairman of [Share Our Strength](#) and the No Kid Hungry campaign (@NoKidHungry). He is also board chair of Community Wealth Partners, a subsidiary organization of Share Our Strength.

James Siegal (@JamesSiegal) is CEO of [KaBOOM!](#), the national nonprofit that seeks to give children the childhood they deserve filled with balanced and active play, so they can thrive (@kaboom).

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