

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

September 16, 2016 | [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)

Living in the World of Both/And

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In 2011, New York Times data scientist Jake Porway wrote a blog post lamenting the fact that most data scientists spend their days creating apps to help users find restaurants, TV shows, or parking spots, rather than addressing complicated social issues like helping identify which teens are at risk of suicide or creating a poverty index of Africa using satellite data.

That post hit a nerve. Data scientists around the world began clamoring for opportunities to “do good with data.” Porway—at the center of this storm—began to convene these scientists and connect them to nonprofits via hackathon-style events called DataDives, designed to solve big social and environmental problems. There was so much interest, he eventually quit his day job at the Times and created the organization [DataKind](#) to steward this growing global network of data science do-gooders.

At the same time, in the same city, another movement was taking shape—[#GivingTuesday](#), an annual global giving event fueled by social media. In just five years, [#GivingTuesday](#) has reshaped how nonprofits think about fundraising and how donors give. And yet, many don’t know that 92nd Street Y (92Y)—a 140-year-old Jewish community and cultural center in Manhattan, better known for its star-studded speaker series, summer camps, and water aerobics classes—launched it.

What do these two examples have in common? One started as a loose global network that engaged data scientists in solving problems, and then became an organization to help support the larger movement. The other started with a legacy organization, based at a single site, and catalyzed a global movement that has reshaped how we think about philanthropy. In both cases, the founding groups have incorporated the best of both organizations and networks.

Much has been written about the virtues of thinking and acting collectively to solve seemingly intractable challenges. Nonprofit leaders are being implored to put mission above brand, build networks not just programs, and prioritize collaboration over individual interests. And yet, these

strategies are often in direct contradiction to the conventional wisdom of organization-building: differentiating your brand, developing unique expertise, and growing a loyal donor base.

A similar tension is emerging among network and movement leaders. These leaders spend their days steering the messy process required to connect, align, and channel the collective efforts of diverse stakeholders. It's not always easy: Those searching to sustain movements often cite the lost momentum of the Occupy movement as a cautionary note. Increasingly, network leaders are looking at how to adapt the process, structure, and operational expertise more traditionally associated with organizations to their needs—but without co-opting or diminishing the energy and momentum of their self-organizing networks.

In our consulting and advising work over the past few years, we have seen this pattern time and again: organizations that are adapting to become more like networks and harness the “wisdom of the crowds;” and decentralized networks or movements that are creating more centralized “backbone” structures to support their activities

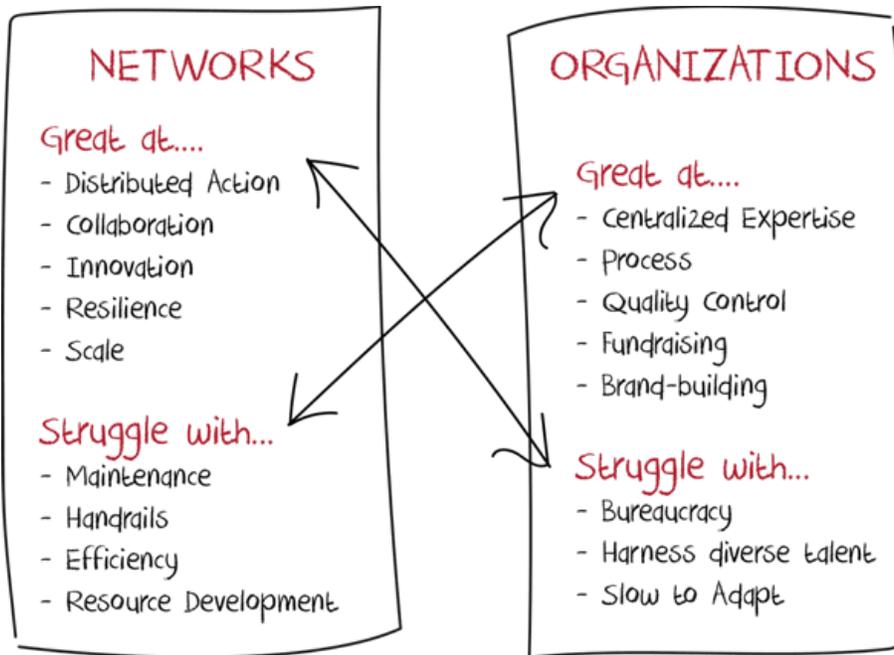
Welcome to the World of “Both/And”

Today's social change leaders—be they from business, government, or nonprofits—must learn to straddle the leadership mindsets and practices of both networks and organizations, and know when to use which approach. Leaders like Porway, and Henry Timms and Asha Curran of 92Y can help show us the way.

How do these leaders work with the “both/and” mindset?

First, they understand and leverage the strengths of both organizations and networks—and anticipate their limitations. As Timms describes it, leaders need to be “bilingual” and embrace what he has called “**new power**.” Networks can be powerful generators of new talent or innovation around complex multi-sector challenges. It's useful to take a network approach when innovating new ideas, mobilizing and engaging others in the work, or wanting to expand reach and scale quickly. However, networks can dissipate easily without specific “handrails,” or some structure to guide and support their work. This is where they need some help from the organizational mindset and approach.

On the flip side, organizations are good at creating centralized structures to deliver products or services, manage risk, oversee quality control, and coordinate concrete functions like communications or fundraising. However, often that efficiency and effectiveness can calcify over time, becoming a barrier to new ideas and growth opportunities. When organizational boundaries are too rigid, it is difficult to engage the outside world in ideating or mobilizing on an issue. This is when organizations need an infusion of the “network mindset.”



92Y: An Organization Acting like a Network

The 92Y example illustrates how to combine the best of both worlds. Timms, then a senior director at 92Y, came up with the idea of #GivingTuesday in October of 2012, and brought in Curran to help lead it. The date is significant, because it was also 60 days before year end—a moment when most nonprofits focus on maximizing their visibility and end-of-year fundraising. The decision to move forward with #GivingTuesday meant that Timms and Curran adopted a “lean,” experimental mentality, essentially upending institutional conventions.

Curran points to the decision to launch in 60 days rather than a year and 60 days as a turning point. It would have taken a full year to study the potential impact and convince all the powers that be at 92Y that they should try it out. Instead, they decided to fly somewhat under the radar to test their idea. Curran and Timms used a network approach; they raised dedicated funds, built a network of external partners to support event marketing and tool development, and created an internal team of folks at 92Y who, like them, wanted to contribute because it was fun and didn’t interfere with their day jobs.

Of course, we now know that the first #GivingTuesday was a huge success—and the rest, as they say, is history. In 60 days, the 92Y team had built a coalition of a dozen, highly visible partners, including the UN Foundation, Facebook, and Stanford; engaged 2,500 nonprofits; gained the attention of national funders like the Gates and Case Foundations; and, inevitably, raised the visibility of 92Y.

The leadership of 92Y celebrated the unexpected success, and then began internal conversations about the role of innovation at the organization. Now with #GivingTuesday in its fifth year, Timms has become the executive director, Curran the chief innovation officer, and the team has launched the **Belfer Center for Innovation and Social Impact** to scale the role of collaboration, media and partnerships both inside and outside the 92Y. Innovation in programming has always been central to what this legacy organization is about—but it took launching an external network to get them there on a global, 21st-century scale.

DataKind: A Network Acting like an Organization

DataKind is both a network and an organization. Who leads and who follows is a constant source of conversation at every level of its work. Porway describes the challenges in balancing depth and speed, expertise and reliability, and cost when he talks about how to straddle between the network and the organization mindset to achieve DataKind's larger mission of harnessing data science in the service of humanity. As a result, DataKind has developed a hybrid model that attempts to integrate the organization and network approach at multiple levels.

One example is a recent project to reduce traffic fatalities, launched in partnership with Microsoft and **Vision Zero**. To understand what interventions might reduce pedestrian deaths, the programs team at DataKind HQ wanted to determine where collisions in dense cities occur. It posed that challenge to a team of 20 volunteer data scientists in the DataKind Network, who then worked to create predictive models that accounted for traffic, weather, time, and other facts that contribute to greater pedestrian risk. The DataKind staff then integrated these models into the next phase of the project. There is no way DataKind, the organization, could have afforded the expertise it needed in this case without the network. And it is unlikely that DataKind, the network, could have continued to move the project forward without the organization.

Porway describes having to constantly make the case for the hybrid model. If staff pushes too much responsibility to the network, Porway worries about metrics and timeline. If they push forward without the network, Porway worries about relevance and scalability. As a result, DataKind encourages staff to be the masters of people and process, rather than product.

The Benefits of Living the Both/And

Conventional wisdom argues that leading in a centralized, or organizational, way will result in more money, more brand recognition, and greater results. But these and other cases prove that untrue. Rather, organizations that embrace a network approach—and vice versa, networks that embrace some elements of organizations—can actually create greater value all around. By growing the entire pie, they often end up with a larger slice.

From an organizational perspective, 92Y has benefitted enormously from #GivingTuesday. In addition to garnering greater philanthropic support, the campaign provides an incredible platform

for 92Y to promote its work on reimagining community engagement. The brand has not suffered. And its budget has grown beyond its typical earned revenue.

Similarly, in just five years, DataKind has become one of the biggest organizations (or networks) in its field. Funders are attracted by both the diversity of talent at the table and the network's high productivity. DataKind stewards multiple projects annually, producing results that other data scientists and nonprofits could replicate. Its ability to weave its network with a highly productive programs team supported by a more traditional executive leadership means it can more actively support the field as a whole.

Conclusion

Integration of both the network and organizational mindset is a practice that requires cultivation. There is no perfect mix of the two, and network and organizational leaders alike need to find the balance that best serves their mission. An important aspect of this cultivation is allowing time and tolerance for experimentation. It is important to start small and engage an enthusiastic team of co-conspirators in your work, and to reflect on and integrate what you learn into your organization. This dynamic interchange holds much promise for helping both organizations and networks increase their social impact.

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/living_in_the_world_of_both_and



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