

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

Building Networks and Movements for Social Change

Lessons from a new initiative aimed at supporting and developing new social justice leaders.

By **Heather McLeod Grant** | 6 | Sep. 4, 2014

The social sector is at a critical inflection point, a moment when external and internal forces are challenging many of its old ways of working. The sector is undergoing an intergenerational transfer of power, as the leadership of legacy nonprofits shifts from baby boomers to diverse Generation Xers and millennials who have new perspectives on how to lead.

Simultaneously, new technologies such as social media are disrupting "analog" approaches, and threatening to break down traditional silos within and between organizations. And as more nonprofits experiment with approaches like **collective impact**, collaboration is becoming the new normal rather than the rare exception. Consequently, there's a growing recognition that we need new strategies and tactics for social change.

In 2010, recognizing these shifts and eager to experiment with new approaches to philanthropy, the San Francisco-based **Levi Strauss Foundation** (LSF) launched a program called **Pioneers in Justice**, offering intense support to a cohort of Bay Area Gen X leaders who had recently become executive directors of legacy social justice organizations. Over the past few years, the program has helped these nonprofits build social media skills, transform their aging organizations, and mobilize larger networks and movements to drive greater social change. In short, it has helped them cross the chasm from old ways of working to new.

The LSF program offered participants three specific types of support:

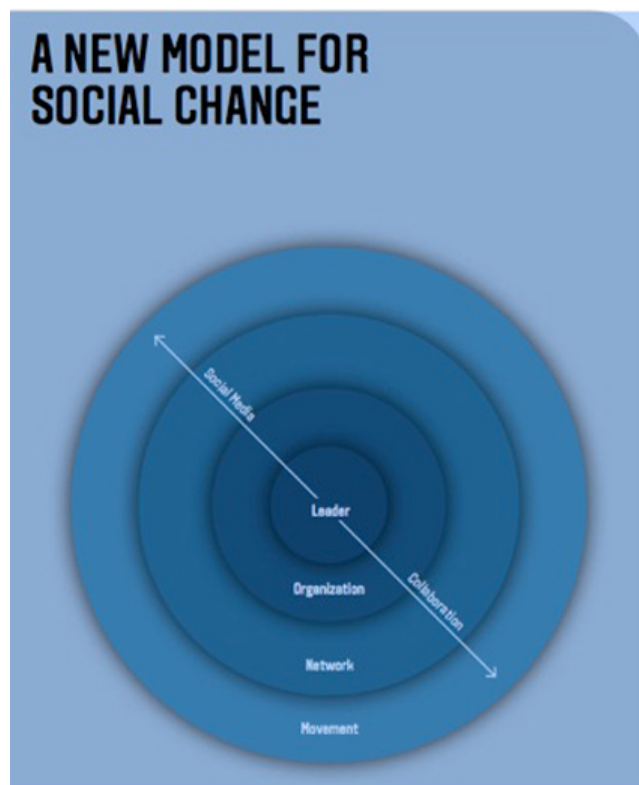
1. Capacity-building grants to create the requisite technology infrastructure, strategies, and communications skills needed to integrate social media into their work
2. Collaboration grants to support projects and “experimental” partnerships that reached across sector, field, issue, and constituency
3. Bi-monthly peer learning forums, where the leaders could share their experiences, learn together, and support one another in exploring new ways of spreading their messages and growing their movements

In the first three years of the five-year program, LSF invested close to \$2.9 million in the program, including \$1.72 million for capacity building and \$580,000 for collaborative projects.

Mid-way through implementation, the foundation hired me to come in and write up the many lessons they are learning from this work. The result is a recent report called “**Pioneers in Justice: Building Networks and Movements for Social Change**,” just published by the Levi Strauss Foundation. This report documents the many ways these Gen X leaders have helped transform their legacy organizations. The foundation's hope is that this program can serve as a model to all nonprofits and funders seeking to work in more networked ways to scale their impact.

LSF's Theory of Change and Lessons Learned

The Pioneers program is anchored in the belief that the larger social justice field must shift from a “1.0” model to a “2.0” way of operating that prioritizes dialogue over one-way communication, collaboration over individual action, and grassroots power over organizational authority. Through the program, the foundation continues to test out a theory of change that can be visualized as four concentric circles, with the leaders at the center, then their organizations, then their networks, and finally the broader movements they are helping to build. The goal is to help transform each area, with social media and collaboration acting as a driving force that can increase the speed and scope of the changes taking place at all levels of the system—not in a linear fashion but in each circle simultaneously.



The program has allowed the new leaders to drive transformative change at the various levels of the systems in which they operate. It has helped these nonprofits:

The program's theory of change can be visualized as four concentric circles, with transformation happening at each level of this system: the leaders, their organizations, their networks, and their larger movements. (Image courtesy of Patrick Mitchell)

1. **Embrace social media** by building organizational capabilities around the use of new technologies, deepening their understanding of how social media can break down silos and change the way nonprofits work, and helping their organizations adapt more quickly. For example, at the beginning of the program, nonprofit Equal Rights Advocates (ERA) had very old computers, no bandwidth or capability for sharing videos, a static and outdated website, and little internal capacity around using social media. After just two years, the nonprofit had used Pioneer funding to update all of its technology infrastructure and shift from using faxes to send out press releases to using much more current forms of communication. The program literally helped them transform their ability to share their message and engage others in their work.
2. **Develop new leadership** by managing executive leadership transitions, finding ways to share leadership at the top and with the board, and trying on new ways of sharing leadership that break from traditional, more hierarchical approaches. At one nonprofit, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, this took the form of two leaders sharing the executive director role. By sharing power at the top of the organization, the co-directors Hyeon-Ju Rho and Chris Punongbayan were able to divide an overwhelming job into something much more sustainable for them both. In addition to modeling more flexible and shared forms of leadership for their staff, it also enabled the organization to better survive a leadership transition when Rho recently left her job. In fact, dealing with leadership transitions was a major theme for almost all of the Pioneer groups, as nonprofit leaders change jobs more frequently these days.
3. **Catalyze organizational change** by creating outward-looking organizations that embrace collaboration, letting go of organizational ego in service of a larger cause, ensuring staff and board are aligned around “networked” approaches, and nurturing next-generation leaders. For example, Kimberly Thomas-Rapp, who runs the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights, enlisted her all-lawyer board to help transform the organization's culture and embrace more open, transparent, and engaged ways of working with their constituents. She says the program helped provide her with important peer support during a critical inflection point and also strengthened her board relationships. Other groups used the program to help shift their organizational cultures and structures to embrace more networked ways of working.
4. **Build networks** by facilitating collaboration between and across like-minded organizations,

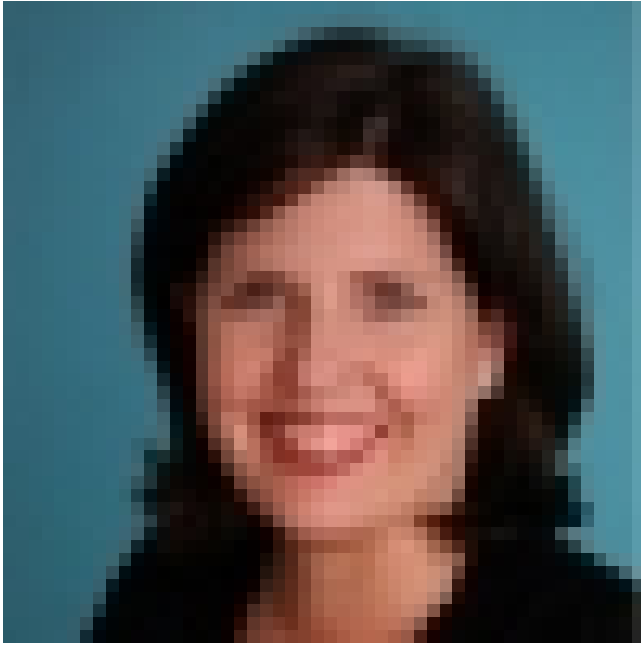
working at the “intersections” of various issue areas, and transitioning to being more networked nonprofits by sharing brands and backbone organizations. Vincent Pan, executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), was inspired by this program to catalyze a new local network called Asian Americans for Civil Rights and Equality. The network enables eight volunteer-led, grassroots nonprofits to share back-office infrastructure and leverage some of CAA's resources to dramatically expand their impact with much less investment. It's a great example of how using networks can help the whole become greater than the sum of the parts.

5. **Spark movements** by catalyzing broader and more effective collective action, engaging new and more diverse constituents, and building on social justice values of the past while using new tools to accelerate change. Abdi Soltani, executive director of the Northern California ACLU, has been a real pioneer in expanding the constituency of what has traditionally been a white, baby-boomer-dominated membership organization. By opening an office in the Central Valley, reaching out to college students, creating programs in Spanish to engage Latinos, and joining forces with other civil rights groups to push for immigration reform, he has managed to both increase and diversify the nonprofit's members, and engage many more people in its cause. In fact, all of the Pioneers worked together on immigration reform as an issue and helped contribute to the passage of the groundbreaking Trust Act legislation in California.

While the Pioneers program still has two more years to run, as these examples illustrate, the Levi Strauss foundation has learned a tremendous amount from this experiment in supporting social justice leaders to magnify their impact. It believes it has found a promising model and that this kind of philanthropy is a best practice for achieving greater social change.

Heather McLeod Grant is the founder of McLeod-Grant Advisors; she's a consultant, advisor, speaker, trainer and entrepreneur with more than twenty years experience in the social sector. She is the co-author of *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*, and numerous other articles.

This report was written by social impact expert and author Heather McLeod Grant, and published by the Levi Strauss Foundation to help capture and share the lessons emerging from their work.



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