TOO OFTEN WE ENGAGE IN LINEAR, SIMPLISTIC SOLUTIONS, WHEN LASTING CHANGE REQUIRES COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS.

By Rich Tafel | Mar. 20, 2012

Motivational speakers love the starfish story: A man walking along a shore covered with washed-up, dying starfish notices a boy throwing them back into the ocean, one by one. The man says to the boy that there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish, and that he’ll never make a difference. As the boy throws a starfish back into the ocean, he says, “I just made a difference to that one.”

This story epitomizes the mindset of our social entrepreneur movement—the lone hero making a difference in the life of one person by not falling into the paralysis of cynicism. The power of one.

But the story also represents the great failure of the social entrepreneur movement. Too often we fail to recognize the complex nature of the problems we face. We engage in linear, simplistic solutions, when lasting change requires collaborative efforts.

Action is important, but we also need to ask the bigger, strategic questions to create real solutions. In the starfish story, that would mean asking questions like: “What caused all of these starfish to dry up on the beach? What systems are at work here? Where can we have the greatest impact?”

As it happens, in 2008, thousands of starfish actually did wash up on the shores of Kent, England. Agencies and environmentalists considered weather and the possibility of disease as the cause, but after asking more questions, they found the cause was likely man-made. Dredgers, a tool fisherman...
use to scrape the sea floor for mussels, were almost certainly to blame, and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) concluded that the incident was an example of overfishing. The MCS began to lobby the government “to dramatically extend its protection of the seas.” One group member said about the lobby efforts, “It's about protecting the whole ecosystem.”

Real world problems usually result from a broken ecosystem, and solutions most often require some kind of change to the rules. Had the citizens of Kent organized a starfish-throwing campaign, they would have been perpetuating the problem. Without new fishing practices and policy, those same starfish surely would wash ashore again. Worse, the rescuers would have tricked themselves into believing they were actually solving the problem.

The same is true for much of what passes as social entrepreneurism today. Many of us throw a few lucky ones back into the ocean and pat ourselves on the back saying, “Well, it made it difference to that one.” We might even frame our heroics at our annual fundraising banquet, giving the impression that we’re solving the problem.

Starfish throwing, like charity, isn’t a bad thing, but it is not a solution. When we confuse charity and justice, we perpetuate injustice. True world change requires more of its leaders. We must have the courage to work within our complex systems to change the rules.

Foundations that fund nonprofits must take the lead. They must ask potential grantees what root causes, policies, rules, and systems their innovation will engage to bring lasting world change. These simple questions will force the social change agents to find ways to create lasting change—to do more than throw starfish.

Rich Tafel is the Founder of Public Squared multiplying citizen impact in social change. You can follow him on twitter @richtafel.
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