To Reach Transformative Scale, Transform the Conversation

Scaling impact is much bigger than scaling an enterprise.

By Gerald Chertavian | Apr. 24, 2014

I started Year Up in the hopes of scaling the impact I’d seen with David Heredia, a young boy I mentored through the Big Brothers program. I was able to support David as he pursued his college degree, and saw how the combination of caring adults and an opportunity to build his skills empowered him to reach his potential. Today he is a successful artist, a loving father and spouse, and a Big Brother himself.

We at Year Up aspire to replicate the impact I saw with David, and in some ways we’ve succeeded. From our first class of 22 students in Boston in 2001, we have since served more than 9,000 young people in 12 cities. We know our program works: 85 percent of Year Up alumni are employed or in school full-time within four months of graduation, and those who are working earn an average wage of $15 an hour.

Yet as fast we are growing, our organization will never get big enough at current rates to serve a critical mass of our target population. In the United States, there are more than six million young adults, or “opportunity youth,” who are disconnected from stable career pathways. We at Year Up directly serve less than one-tenth of 1 percent of them. Knowing that, we’re still far closer to where
I was when I worked solely with David than where we need to be.

For Year Up to reach transformative scale, we need to catalyze a broad employer movement for wider talent pipelines—one that goes far beyond our own enterprise’s growth. It’s a fundamentally different bet on impact than we’re used to. If we’re ultimately successful in our work, the vast majority of those who benefit from it will never have heard of us.

All of us in the social enterprise sector need to change the bets we’re making. The very data we (funders included) use to evaluate the success of our work is a statement on how we have constrained our thinking about scale. In theory, we all say we care most about the greater movement, but a close look at our metrics shows that our primary concerns are usually exclusive to the people we directly serve. At Year Up, we have worked hard to grow our program and improve our results. But even as we have “succeeded,” the number of opportunity youth—the single number we should ultimately focus on—has increased drastically on our watch.

In some ways, it’s little wonder why. With very few exceptions, most bets in our sphere center on supply. In our case, we have focused on developing and replicating a great program that serves our students well and prepares them for entry-level, livable wage jobs in corporate America. Yet the fact is, this focus approaches the Opportunity Divide as if the supply (the young people we serve) is the problem and only our model can serve them well. Young people are not the problem, and our program is not a silver bullet.

Instead, we need to shift to the demand-side of the equation. There’s little question that employers are missing out on a multitude of young talent. Frustrated by the weak workplace preparation they see in entry-level applicants and eager to maximize efficiency, many companies currently screen out jobseekers who lack prerequisites (such as degrees or connections) or have the wrong attributes (such as poor credit, adjudication histories, and resume gaps). Inadvertently, these processes now screen out almost all low-income young people; less than 10 percent of them ever graduate from college. For employers, investing in expanded talent pipelines can offer a big return.

Helping forward-looking companies articulate and solve for this demand is a game-changing play—and one we should all obsess over. Our bets shouldn’t be on scaling just Year Up or any other individual organization. They should be on establishing proof points, forging strong partnerships, and changing social norms across multiple sectors to drive real collective impact.

Thirteen years in, we know that talking only about how many students we’re serving will prevent us from ever reaching transformative scale.

There is no limit to what we can achieve, though, once we stop worrying about who gets credit.
Year Up will never be the answer on its own, no matter how big we get, because scaling impact is much bigger than scaling an enterprise. Scaling impact requires being humble enough to know we can’t do it alone.

See more from **SSIR x Bridgespan: Achieving Transformative Scale**

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**Gerald Chertavian** (@Gchert) is the founder and CEO of **Year Up** (@YearUp), an intensive one-year training and education program that serves low-income youth ages 18-24 by providing the technical, professional, and communication skills needed to empower urban young adults to make successful transitions to careers and higher education. His narrative of Year Up’s founding and growth is detailed in the **New York Times** bestseller *A Year Up* and has been featured on **60 Minutes**.

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