
BOOK REVIEW

Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits

By Leslie R. Crutchfield & Heather McLeod

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Reviewed by Alex Megelas

LESLIE CRUTCHFIELD AND HEATHER MCLEOD GRANT have high aspirations. On the opening page of *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High Impact Nonprofits* the authors write: “We need new frameworks for understanding what makes nonprofits great, and new ways of thinking about creating social change.”

Forces for Good seeks to showcase patterns of nonprofit excellence, identified during an extensive research project, through systematic presentation of six strong organizational practices. In the authors’ view, these traits make nonprofits more effective in achieving “Good.” The six practices are: combining advocacy and service, making (financial) markets work, inspiring evangelists (i.e., highly involved members), nurturing networks, adapting, and sharing internal leadership. It is an ambitious undertaking.

Invoking the significant recent growth of the community sector, Crutchfield and McLeod Grant are primarily interested in breadth of impact. This leads them to favour organizations that operate on a large scale and with easily quantifiable deliverables, including American heavy-hitters Habitat for Humanity, America’s Second Harvest, and Self Help. While all twelve of the nonprofits selected have annual budgets in the multi-millions of dollars, the authors do not strictly rely on this as a measure of a nonprofit’s capacity for impact but, in addition, consider a variety of results-based factors and adherence to overarching social change values. Unfortunately size does seem a key factor in the organizations selected. Given that, the fact that the grounds for drawing a correlation between high-impact organizations operating at scale in a particular field, and the importance of the sector as a whole is left largely unexplored, is a major weakness.

For those with a research bent, the book includes appendices in which the authors report the various steps that led them to the organizations they showcase.

Undoubtedly, there’s much to be learned in this book. *Forces for Good* is most compelling in the stories of challenges and innovations of the profiled organizations. The authors highlight, for instance, Environmental Defense’s policy of retaining the rights to any innovations developed when they partner with business, so that they can subsequently work with other companies in the industry to improve the practices of their initial partner’s competitors. They also outline how Share Our Strength, which is mandated to alleviate childhood hunger, engaged prominent chefs on behalf of its cause (as well as the organization’s less successful venture in enlisting professional sport teams).

ALEX MEGELAS works at the Centre for Community Organizations (Centre des organismes communautaires), better known as COCo, in Montreal. He has been involved with various community initiatives over the past ten years, including the youth organization Head & Hands and the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Community Council. He is co-founder of Grenadine Records and of GeekMontreal.com.

But sometimes these anecdotes seem to echo the book's super-sized focus. The premise that, owing to their sheer size and ability to churn out "change," these twelve organizations are somehow worthy to be held up as examples to the rest of us, rankles. It raises the question, does "significant social change" always need to be directly associated with breadth of impact?

At the very least, the underlying premise here could be more fully explored. The authors acknowledge the famous distinction between giving a man a fish and teaching him how to fish. But they don't seem to apply this analysis when discussing the obviously laudable work of some of the profiled organizations, such as American's Second Harvest providing several million tons of food to hungry folks or Teach for America increasing America's educational capacity.

In showcasing approaches to building financial independence, the authors praise a deal between hunger-relief nonprofit Share Our Strength and American Express that allowed the organization to raise funds while the credit card company generated significant card usage and profits. Fair enough – it is an undoubtedly well-executed example of potentially long-lasting corporate partnership. Yet if, as the authors claim, what is sought is a deeper, more meaningful social good, why are the partnership's less desirable consequences in sustaining current consumer and environmental models not taken into consideration (or at the very least acknowledged) when evaluating the "social change" in such a joint-venture?

Much of *Forces for Good* focuses on drawing people to existing social institutions. Crutchfield and McLeod Grant praise efforts that work with, not against, potentially questionable corporate interests – such as highlighting Environmental Defense's decision to work with Walmart and McDonald's as an example of "getting more bang for your [social change] buck." In discussing networking and leadership, the authors deal with alternative approaches – acknowledging it is important to know when to go it alone and that there are widely different leadership styles in high-impact organizations. But, in the "Make Markets Work" section, there is no discussion of organizations working steadfastly against corporate interests.

This bias toward existing social hierarchies is reinforced in the section "Master the Art of Adaptation." America's Second Harvest vice president Al Brislain is quoted here: "You have to adapt to the environment around you. You can't impose your reality on your environment."

The authors attempt to nuance this slightly. They acknowledge that nonprofits must become dynamic communities, and *Forces for Good* stresses the need to look beyond the confines of the staff-board-volunteer-donor model to the meaningful involvement of stakeholders. Unfortunately, this is primarily presented in support to fundraising and service delivery. Outreach to clients or beneficiaries is not dealt with, seemingly reducing the possibility of an active challenge to organizational makeup.

There is little consideration of an organization's commitment to internal, sustainable change. Although Crutchfield and McLeod acknowledge that the twelve industry giants showcased are not perfect, and that they may demonstrate internal management short-

comings, they present the externally measured impacts of these organizations as trumping any internal problems.

While the organizations presented are undoubtedly worthwhile and improve the lives of the people with whom they engage, alternatives that acknowledge the complexity of individual makeup and subjective imperatives also need to be developed. For example, what Paulo Freire (1976)¹ invokes, in describing the practice of freedom, is a way in which we can critically participate in the world around us, instilling creativity in an engaging way that is deeply transformative. In envisioning change, can we create spaces based on an alternative dialog that does not necessarily revolve around current power centres and that affirms the strength and complexity of individuals?

Note

¹ Freire, Paulo. (1976). *Practice of Freedom*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.