

Civic Engagement

Building Movements, Not Organizations

Creating a healthy, humane world will require more than new organizational designs. It will take rethinking the nature of organizations entirely.

By [Hildy Gottlieb](#) | Jul. 28, 2015

In his 2007 book *Blessed Unrest*, [Paul Hawken](#) described a growing global movement to create a healthy, humane world—work that is happening not under a single banner, but by millions of unaffiliated individuals and groups around the world.

Since then, the social change arena has grown rapidly. We have witnessed the proliferation of traditional nonprofits (or as we prefer to call them, community-benefit organizations). Social enterprise has become so mainstream that it is a field of study at many major universities. We've also seen a marked shift in the traditional business world—from what was in many cases greenwashing, to the genuine rise of socially minded businesses.

And yet, we continue to witness war, poverty, individual acts of violence, massive social injustice, and a record pace of environmental degradation. .

Looking back over the past century, however, the world has indeed experienced sweeping social change. Those successful efforts were led not by individual organizations, but by movements.

What might be possible, therefore, if socially minded organizations and businesses acted more like movements than organizations? And what might that look like in practice?

To answer those questions, consider how we might re-define the following three factors: *success*, *leadership*, and *means*.

Defining Success

- In a movement, the mission defines the ultimate goal the group intends to achieve. When a movement achieves success—"Mission accomplished!"—everyone goes home. In organizations, however, the mission defines "what we do." Success in an organization means that everyone gets to stick around!
- Movements define success globally. If a movement is successful, things change for everyone. Organizations, on the other hand, often define success internally, by what the organization accomplishes for itself.

- Movements seek sweeping change. Organizations are often satisfied with incremental improvement, correctly understanding that one entity cannot achieve large-scale change.
- In movements, accountability is to a cause greater than any one individual. When it comes to making tough decisions, the cause is the top priority. In organizations, accountability is first to the organization; when leaders face tough decisions, their top priority is organizational sustainability.
- The word “movement” means “to create action,” to go from one place to another. Sustaining a movement is about sustaining action. Per Merriam-Webster, the word “organization” means “the act or process of putting the different parts of something in a certain order so that they can be found or used easily.” Sustaining an organization is about sustaining order.

Defining Leadership

- Movements begin with values. In successful movements, decisions and actions align with those values. Organizations begin with actions, reinforced by axioms such as “core competencies” and “fail fast.” Values are rarely used as the consistent barometer for determining which actions to take.
- Leading a movement is an active role—it involves leading actual activities, most often with no official title. By contrast, leading an organization is a titular role—chief executive officer. Those titular leaders, in virtually all organizations larger than a tiny start-up, are not the ones leading actual activities.
- In a movement, leadership emerges from within. Anyone can join, simply by committing to take action on behalf of the cause. Once “inside,” becoming a leader is self-determined by each individual taking action and contributing. Organizations, on the other hand, often look “outside” for leaders. People can join an organization only in formal roles (board member, staff, volunteer, intern). And individuals themselves do not control whether they rise through the ranks; those with formal decision-making authority make that call.
- Leadership of a movement is distributed and agile, as individuals become more deeply engaged and bring others into the fold. Leadership in an organization is structured and most often hierarchical, per a fixed organizational chart. Outsiders most commonly engage by providing cash—as a donor to a nonprofit, or as a customer or investor in a business.
- Governance of movements is about values, strategy, and direct action. Governance in organizations is about regulatory compliance, oversight, and risk management. Strategy is most often developed by others in the organization, and then approved by those “in charge.” Values do not routinely enter into governance conversations.
- Ultimately, the movement is the leader—people working on behalf of a movement are loyal to other individuals within the movement and to a cause larger than those

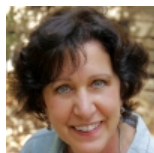
individuals. In organizations, leadership cultivates loyalty to the organization.

Defining Means

- In a movement, form follows function. As functional needs change, movements value forms that are agile and effective. In organizations, function is guided by form, beginning with the very first official act of most organizations—filing articles of incorporation, bylaws, and other declarations of the forms around which the entity will fit its functions. From there, organizations value stability and efficiency: “This is how we do things.”
- Movements are supported from the inside out—first by those most involved and most directly affected by the cause, and then in concentric circles rippling outward. Movements define “resources” as the actual resources needed (labor, materials), which are abundant even in communities that seem to have very little. Organizations, on the other hand, are primarily supported from the outside —by customers, donors, grantors, investors, or patrons. Defining “resources” as cash, community-benefit organizations in particular do not assume that the recipients of their services will be the primary contributors to the group’s success.
- Movements tend to adopt structures and systems that mirror how societies progress toward people living well together. Organizations tend to adopt systems that mirror how businesses and nations maintain sovereignty over others.

The social change arena is continually experimenting with new organizational forms to further the movement Paul Hawken described. The more intentional organizations are in structuring their end goals, leadership, and means to become more movement-like, the more likely those efforts are to succeed in creating a healthier, more humane world.

[View a side-by-side movement vs. organization comparison chart here.](#)



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