

Leadership

# Five Steps to Building an Effective Impact Network

How network entrepreneurs can catalyze large-scale social impact through a process that applies to networks across all systems and sectors.

By [David Ehrlichman](#), [David Sawyer](#), & [Jane Wei-Skillern](#) | Nov. 11, 2015

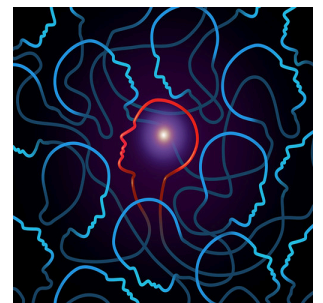
In *The New Network Leader* series, seven network entrepreneurs—leaders at the heart of some of today’s most sophisticated, large-scale solutions to the world’s social problems—have shared their accounts of catalyzing networks to create powerful social change. Although these networks take many forms, each has required consistent engagement with **four network principles—trust, not control; humility, not brand; node, not hub; and mission, not organization**—as well as the following fundamental process:

- Clarify purpose.
- Convene the right people.
- Cultivate trust.
- Coordinate actions.
- Collaborate generously.

These steps don’t necessarily happen in order; leaders must reaffirm them throughout a network’s formation and evolution. Consistently engaging with this process helps ensure that the four principles get baked into impact networks as they emerge.

Here is a look at each step, with examples from the network entrepreneurs who contributed to the series.

**Clarify purpose.** Clarifying a network’s purpose—its reason for being—is an ongoing endeavor. It must be clear enough initially to identify the right partners and encourage them to meet. As these individuals and groups convene, the network should refine its purpose. Purpose must also be ambitious enough to require that early network



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members engage those they would rather ignore or compete with. That's one reason Dreams InDeed uses the word "dream" to drive its work rather than "good idea," "mission," or even "purpose."

Clarifying purpose requires sense-making: mapping the system, examining the problem from diverse perspectives, finding shared values, and recognizing external forces. It also requires understanding the local context, including the history of the place or system, related efforts, political and power dynamics, and hardwired assumptions. By clarifying purpose and context, each network member becomes keenly aware that they are just one among many participants working across the system. And in the process, they begin to understand and embrace the network principle of acting as a *node, not hub*.

The Graustein Memorial Fund, for example, convened its network of collaboratives across 52 Connecticut cities and towns **to help design an early-childhood system that would work for all**. But before it could reach its goal, the network needed to figure out *why* Connecticut was achieving less-than-optimal results for young children. It embraced systems thinking, explored hard issues, held real conversations, and collectively identified racism and economic inequity as the primary drivers that contribute to poor education outcomes for children across the state.

**Convene the right people.** The "right people": 1) collectively represent all parts of the system, 2) have the ability to get things done, and 3) are willing to cross boundaries and work with people who may have very different perspectives and priorities. This includes everyone impacted by the issue, even people you may not want to work with. Real progress on complex or "wicked" problems requires uncommon coordination and collaboration across divides.

Seattle's "**Grand Bargain**" on **affordable housing**, for example, emerged only after the Mayor invited 28 community leaders—who collectively represented all parts of the housing system—to the table. This diverse group of stakeholders showed a "willingness to let go" and work together despite contrasting priorities.

Sustainable Conservation **convened stakeholders from across the nursery and environmental system** to drastically reduce the number of invasive plants in California. This "PlantRight" network developed a shared understanding of diverse perspectives, built trust, and began to collaborate. Ultimately, the network achieved effective and sustained results in large part because nursery business leaders offered a more-credible message and helped educate their peers on the value of the program. The prominent national ornamental plant grower Altman Plants, for example, introduced PlantRight to The Home Depot buyers and helped secure The Home Depot's commitment to not sell invasive plants in California.

This series highlights the work of seven leading "network entrepreneurs," who are generating systems-level social impact in environmental conservation, education, economic development, and beyond.



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**Cultivate trust.** Sustained, authentic relationships are the foundation of all successful collaborative efforts.

**Cultivating trust intentionally, rather than passively,** provides the basis for a culture in which network participants embrace the network principle of *trust, not control*. When a network runs on trust, its potential for scaling impact drastically increases. As Eric Heitz and Barbara Wagner from the Energy Foundation write, “The trust and fluid communication that can move ideas quickly comes through human relationships.”

Building trust doesn't mean that people have to like each other or agree, but it does mean they have to be willing to engage in authentic and sometimes unpleasant conversations about the things that divide and challenge them, including gender, race, and power. The objective is to create *trust for impact*. This specific type of trust enables diverse actors to hold the tension through difficult conversations, find a slice of common ground, and work together, despite organizational differences and personal disagreements. Especially in volatile, emerging contexts, trust for impact must be rooted not just in shared purpose, but also in shared values and a shared understanding of how to behave and treat each other when disagreements inevitably arise.

The nonprofit Interise has embraced a relational approach to scale its mission of economic revitalization, **growing a network of trust-based partnerships to rapidly scale** and distribute its award winning StreetWise ‘MBA’ program to more than 60 low-income communities (and counting) across the United States. Interise CEO Jean Horstman says, “From program to network—it’s all about trust. Once established, trust is resilient. Unlike a transactional model, where money can come and go, trusted relationships stay put.”

**Coordinate actions.** By identifying and coordinating work that is already happening, participants can leverage organizational resources, collaborate around common goals, and avoid duplication of efforts. And because emergent collaborative solutions are so dynamic, the most effective networks assign and coordinate roles as well. Network roles may include a “core team” to handle certain governance decisions, a facilitator to design and lead the convenings, and a network manager to serve the network’s emergent needs.

Network entrepreneurs don't insist that all participants across a network agree on any single issue or project. Wicked problems are constantly evolving; no single action or organization can solve them. Instead of looking for a silver bullet, it's critical to address the problem from many angles with a smart, coordinated effort.

For instance, **to reach the goal of a “no-kill nation,”** animal welfare organization Maddie’s Fund strengthens and coordinates existing efforts by supporting effective organizations large and small, rural and urban, and helping establish a shared measurement platform that allows organizations to compare what worked and what didn't in different communities across the United States. But Maddie’s Fund also works to address areas for leverage in the animal welfare system, promoting the veterinary specialty of shelter medicine education, building the capacity of local community shelters, and driving public awareness and culture change.

And to advance clean energy in the United States, the Energy Foundation is **building both state and national networks**, including a network of 12 state coalitions (Energy Efficiency for All) and a national network of more than 100 members (Network for Energy, Water and Health in Affordable Buildings).

**Collaborate generously.** A generous collaborator does not count transactions, giving only as much as they get in return. Instead, they assume positive intent, communicate frequently, and consistently look for opportunities to work with others in support of shared goals, not personal gain.

Generous collaborators are what organizational psychologist Adam Grant calls “successful givers” in his research on “**Givers, Takers, and Matchers.**” The Offre Joie (“Joy of Giving”) volunteer network is a great example; network members **work together to rebuild bombed homes, churches, mosques, and public buildings across Lebanon**, not asking for anything in return. As the Offre Joie slogan says, “Volunteers don’t seek recognition. Don’t thank them. Join them in the Joy of Giving.”

Generous collaboration results directly from practicing the network principles of *humility, not brand, and mission, not organization*. Network members are most likely to embrace a mindset of generous collaboration when they have developed a clear shared purpose, trust for impact, and just enough structure to focus the work.

## Building a Resilient Network for the Long-Term

Cultivating an effective and sustainable impact network requires dedicated effort and a long time-horizon. Impact networks must remain adaptive to changing circumstances. Participants change jobs, organizations shift priorities, external forces change, and problems evolve. Therefore, impact networks must constantly reaffirm their shared purpose, convene the right people, and cultivate trust. As Eric Heitz and Barbara Wagner write, “You can’t expect to plant the seed of a network and walk away when it sprouts.”

Given the complexity and time-intensive nature of building a successful impact network, we have seen many instances where roles are divided between multiple people. For instance, it often makes sense for a respected individual or organization to take an initial leadership role in clarifying purpose and convening the right people, given their existing web of relationships and ability to pull together an initial meeting. The network can then bring in a more experienced network entrepreneur to facilitate convenings, cultivate trust, and serve the network’s emergent needs.

Just as there are teams of business and social entrepreneurs who launch a startup together, there can also be teams of network entrepreneurs who work together to catalyze and sustain networks. A team can be stronger and more resilient than any single person, if they too are connected through a shared purpose and trust for impact.

## Growing the Movement of Network Entrepreneurs

We have shared seven real-life examples of how impact networks have achieved dramatic and sustained change, and we suspect that there are countless other such networks working in this way across the globe. We are committed to supporting and building a movement of network entrepreneurs who help boards, funders, and leaders to think and work in networked ways on behalf of a better planet.

In our view, a positive future requires that we build regional and global networks of people aligned around shared values and shared purpose, who engage authentically and with deep trust, and who collaborate generously for maximum positive impact. We must build networks of diverse stakeholders that see the largest possible context, seek to address root causes instead of just symptoms, and plan for the long-term.

Trust for impact, above all else, is the critical ingredient needed for successful collaboration—no matter the type of structure or level of resource. Investing in “return on relationships” makes all the difference.

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Read more stories by *Jane Wei-Skillern*, *David Ehrlichman* & *David Sawyer*.



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