



INDEPENDENT
SECTOR

THREADS

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

OAKLAND HIGHLIGHTS



THREADS OAKLAND

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at The Oakland Asian Cultural Center
on June 10, 2015

INDEPENDENT SECTOR THANKS OUR FUNDERS, PARTNERS, AND HOST FOR SUPPORTING THREADS OAKLAND

FUNDERS

California HealthCare Foundation
The California Wellness Foundation
East Bay Community Foundation
The James Irvine Foundation
The San Francisco Foundation

PARTNERS

The Bridgespan Group
California Association of Nonprofits
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

OVERVIEW OF THREADS

At the start of 2015, Independent Sector launched a series of community conversations called “Threads” in cities across the nation. The purpose was to convene leaders from nonprofits and foundations, and our other allies to explore the impact of society-wide trends on our sector today and in years to come. Threads are designed to engage over one thousand leaders in over a dozen cities to generate thousands of data points about (1) practices that are limiting the effectiveness of sector organizations and (2) innovative ideas for how to increase our impact. Each three-hour Thread featured:

- **Part I – Trends:** An overview of 9 global and national trends shaping our sector’s work, followed by a full group discussion to solicit feedback and generate additional insight about the trends;
- **Part II – Challenges and Solutions:** Small group discussions at which participants identify challenges they face at the organizational, sector, and societal level, then generate solutions for a particular challenge;
- **Part III – Bright Spots:** More small group discussions to brainstorm solutions that have moved the needle on a particular social/environmental issue (what we call “bright spots”);
- **Part IV – Feedback:** A large group discussion of potential roles that national organizations like Independent Sector can play to help the sector better accomplish its important work.

Input from each Thread is coded separately, and then analyzed alongside data from other events to create a national picture of challenges and bright spots. While these findings are not scientific per se, we believe they represent important perspectives from the field that can help drive our sector forward.

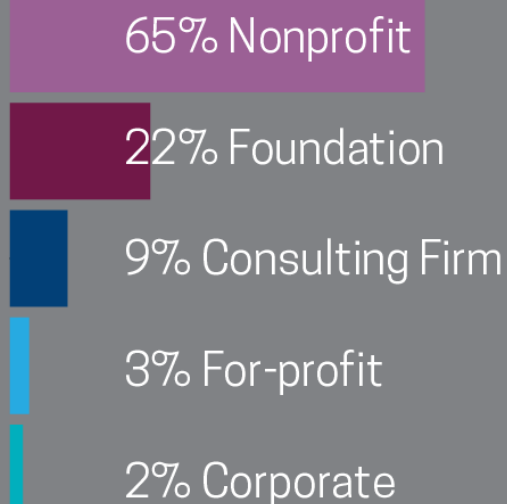
THREADS OAKLAND – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

67 Attendees

73% NON-CEO

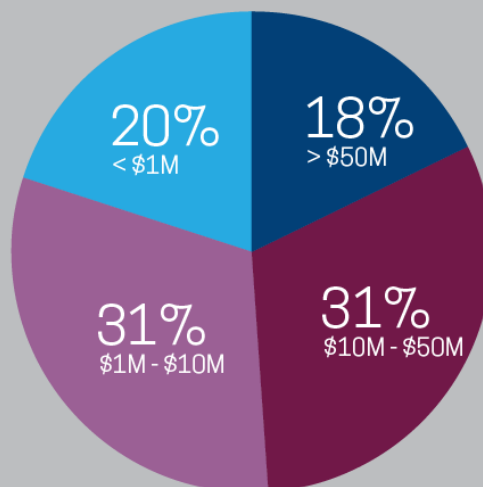
27% CEO

Organization Type



Organization Size

Defined by annual revenue for nonprofits and annual grantmaking for foundations



TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Threads Oakland kicked off with a presentation by Diana Aviv, President and CEO of Independent Sector, on [nine trends](#) shaping the world and our work. She did not make value judgments about the trends. Instead she sought to (1) make people aware of how the trends are shaping our world and therefore our work; and (2) encourage people to respond to the trends in light of their own organization's practices and particular circumstances. After this presentation, she encouraged participants to share their reactions to the trends. The following themes emerged.

Major Themes

- 1. Technology** – Like Silicon Valley, participants in Oakland labeled technology a driving force behind the rapid pace of global change. Several individuals spoke out against the idea that the Internet has been a democratizing force in recent years. They argued that it had widened rather than narrowed the wealth gap and generally “exacerbated inequality” (to quote one attendee).
- 2. Overemphasis on New Approaches** – Audience members talked about an aspect of nonprofit culture in which organizations too eagerly embrace high visibility or “trendy” tactics in lieu of more methodical, time-tested approaches. “We want to do things the quick and sexy way [when] some problems require a lot of unglamorous work,” said one. The conversation touched on the importance of balancing traditional and innovative strategies.
- 3. Demographic Changes** – People expressed profound disappointment in the sector's inability to reflect the changing face of America. The dialogue addressed generational issues (Boomers/Millennials) as well as racial changes (people of color becoming the majority population). “Our sector needs to reflect society,” said one, “if we are going to help solve problems.”
- 4. Maintaining our Independence** – The role of nonprofits that accept large amounts of government funding surfaced as a key theme. People were apprehensive that the sector's independence had been compromised in cases where nonprofits serve as subcontractors/substitutes for government action. Many stated the line between government and service providers had become blurred.

CHALLENGES

ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVELS

At Threads Oakland, we asked participants to respond to the following two questions. What are the most significant challenges your organization is facing? What challenges are holding back the sector at large? Here are the top themes that emerged, followed by quotes from the field.

Major Themes

- 1. Leadership and Culture** – Members of the audience voiced several barriers to innovation. Some said leadership feared failure; it was often too risk averse to try new strategies. Others criticized bureaucratic approaches that hinder change; in contrast, they hailed the “tech industry” for its lack of red tape and willingness to adapt quickly. (Full quote below in “Voices from the Field.”) Still others were thirsty for leaders willing to be more reflective/critical about what we, as a community, could be doing better.
- 2. Financial Sustainability** – The consensus that organizations were under-funded was reflected in Oakland, as it has been all across the country. Like the theme above on Leadership and Culture, attendees talked about a fear of failure, lack of innovation, and inability to experiment because they operated in such a resource-constrained environment. They also aired concern that foundations were beholden to their boards, not communities. Said one individual, “Foundations are too silo-ed. They respond to their board’s interests not to the communities they are serving.”
- 3. Governance and Operations** – Participants discussing this theme focused primarily on the need for greater capacity and the lack of funding to do so. For example, they noted that capacity is “needed but ‘not sexy’ enough to attract donors” and “[we need] capacity infrastructure: well-trained boards, up-to-date computers, training.”

Several other themes arose, including: (a) talent and workforce (recruiting and retaining staff, offering adequate pay/benefits, especially in light of student loans; cultivating a more diverse workforce); (b) impact and evaluation (short-term requirements hamper organizations’ abilities to implement effective long-term solutions; complex outcomes are hard to measure); and (c) diversity and inclusion (lack of cultural competencies among managers in their approach toward young, diverse staff).

Voices from the Field

- “New concepts often face people as barriers. How can we get out of bureaucratic mindset and be open to change?”
- “Fear of failure as a barrier to innovation -- disproportionately impacts nonprofit sector (as it stands in contrast to tech).”
- “For individuals who work in the sector: We are critical of the sector, but we don't look inward enough about what we can do to improve the sector.”
- “Our national organizations aren't giving us leadership. There are a lot of smart people doing good work, but not enough leadership creating a new vision for the sector that isn't focused on finding the money. It's too focused on defending the charitable deduction.”

- “[A challenge is] not fitting within [a] discrete funding category - doesn't encourage innovation.”
- “Funders are often reluctant to fund radical change or experimentation and nonprofits are afraid of failure. So we miss opportunities for radical reimagining of our work.”
- “[A challenge is] competition for funding and people (talent).”
- “Boards [need to be more] representative of staff/communities.”

SOCIETAL LEVEL

At Threads Oakland, we asked participants to look beyond challenges at the organizational- and sector-level by thinking about broader difficulties they faced. Here are the top societal challenges they mentioned.

Major Themes

- 1. Inequality and Inequity** – This theme has surfaced in different ways in many Threads cities. Participants in Oakland spoke about economic and racial implications, the silos created by inequity, and the need for the sector to “come to terms” with these issues. They also discussed the need for society to recognize interdependence in order to thrive.
- 2. Communications and Engagement** – The need to better tell our story and reach out to potential supporters was another critical theme. Issues included the importance of compelling messages and meeting potential supporters where they are, including Millennials.

Voices from the Field

- “A society divided - more than anything else...racialized isolation ...I am only successful when we all are interdependent.”
- “Income inequality and poverty - our refusal to come to terms with all of this. Bridge the divide.”
- “Finding eloquence - internal and external. Finding visibility in cacophony.”
- “Tapping into the thumbing - YouTube generation and their concept of community and organization. Getting where they are.”
- “[A challenge is the] outsized influence of corporations, wealthy, culturally and politically.”

SOLUTIONS

At Threads Oakland, we asked participants to work with small groups to select a single critical challenge— whether from among the problems and objectives raised in the previous segment or from their own experience. We then asked groups to propose solutions to these issues in their own words. Below are their responses.

<p>Challenge:</p> <p>Identifying a common purpose among sector organizations.</p>	<p>Solutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “[Maintain the] ability to disagree and still stay inside the conversation. Don’t have to win, be right, or convince others.” ◦ “Build relationships with each other. Change how we frame things. Start with respect [and] face-to-face conversation.” ◦ “Identify areas of common purpose or pain points.”
--	--

<p>Challenge:</p> <p>Lack of social/economic diversity within the sector workforce.</p>	<p>Solutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “[We must have the] courage to start the conversation.” ◦ “Create [a] diversity recruitment function that includes a website, training, and executive searches and bring up [this] issue with members – create common ground between view points.”
--	--

Challenge:

Difficulty of attracting new talent to the sector.

Solutions:

- “Redefine the brand of the sector.”
- “Celebrate the talent. Ten years ago there were no celebrity chefs, but some confluence of interests has taken the chef out of the kitchen and made them stars. How can we do the same for the best leaders in our sector?”

Challenge:

Need to improve/shepherd the sector’s brand.

Solutions:

- “We need to address the perception of the sector through a branding conversation. Change the frame in which people place us [e.g., when we adhere to new (higher) minimum wage requirements, we do not expect push back from funders on increased overhead costs]. Collaborate with policy-makers.”

BRIGHT SPOTS

“Bright spots” are solutions to social/environmental problems that have moved the needle or had significant, systematic impact at the societal level. They often tackle a problem from a holistic perspective and therefore involve multiple players. We asked participants to share bright spots during their table discussions. The following themes arose.

Major Themes

1. **Partnerships Within Sector** – Participants in Oakland acknowledged the value of and need to work more effectively with government and business. Doing so, they said, offered multiple benefits such as pooling resources around a shared area of interest; minimizing overlap in services/programs; and the opportunity to use more consistent messaging. Joining forces across sectors would improve the likelihood of achieving more lasting, positive outcomes.
2. **Community Engagement** – Throughout the Threads programs, attendees have consistently mentioned a sense that people are isolated from one another, from their communities, and from the political process. They voiced grave concern over the challenges associated with getting people more engaged in working toward shared goals.

Voices from the Field

1

The Problem: Sex trafficking of American children. The highest rate of human trafficking in the US takes place in the Bay area, Los Angeles, and San Diego.¹

The Solution: In 2009, [HEAT Watch](http://www.heatwatch.org) was created to stop Human Exploitation and Trafficking in Alameda County. Run by the District Attorney’s office, the program uses a comprehensive approach that harnesses the efforts of nonprofits working in this space and encourages active participation from communities, victim advocates, and families. The HEAT Watch website describes their program as an “organization of community partners working for one common goal.”²

In Their Words: One participant lauded HEAT Watch for creating a “blueprint for communities” that “works with law enforcement, supports nonprofits, changes national/state policies and engages the community.” He attributed its success to the fact that HEAT Watch “brings disparate partners together, convincing them that we have to work together to reach common goals.”

¹ http://www.heatwatch.org/human_trafficking/about_csec

² http://www.heatwatch.org/heat_watch/w

2

The Problem: In many African nations, a small number of health care workers (with limited medical training) serve large populations. The medical practitioners are relatively isolated; they have no means to contact one another to discuss diagnoses/medical procedures or alter others to the potential outbreak of disease.

The Solution: [Switchboard](#) launched in 2008 to help medical personnel communicate with one another. It partners with telecom companies to offer free nationwide calling/texting and a health worker registry, so they can find the right medical expert quickly – an especially important feature in life-saving situations. Switchboard also works with the local Ministries of Health to help track medical supply levels as well as potential outbreaks of disease.

In Their Words: Said one individual, Switchboard works with “corporations like Vodacom and government [agencies] to create wide access to health information across Tanzania.” [Note: Switchboard currently operates in Tanzania, Ghana, and Liberia, but its reach will likely expand because in January 2015, [IntraHealth International](#) (a nonprofit advocate for health care workers around the world) acquired Switchboard.]³

3

The Problem: How to transform public outrage over police shootings of African American men into a sustained social movement.

The Solution: The hashtag “Black Lives Matter” lit up social media channels in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin. Citizens and activists alike were appalled and sought to upend institutionalized racism and reform police tactics. To do so, they effectively harnessed the power of the growing swarm (massive virtual networks) around [Black Lives Matter](#) by forming a nonprofit of the same name⁴ and aggressively partnering with organizations that share their goals. Their tag line states, “This is not a moment, but a movement.”

In Their Words: Organizers behind Black Lives Matter advanced their goal “beyond structural limitations ... by doing things differently,” noted one individual. She talked about their use of social media and swarms to circumvent “conventional structures” like traditional news outlets.

³ <http://www.switchboard.org/2015/01/>

⁴ <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

ROLES

We wrapped up Threads Oakland by asking participants to tell us what roles national organizations could play to help local and regional organizations better achieve their missions. Common themes follow.

Major Themes

- 1. Public Policy** – Like other Threads, Oakland involved wide ranging discussions on advocacy. All recognized the value of having an organization like Independent Sector advocate on behalf of our collective interests. Some further encouraged Independent Sector to advance broader issues such as fighting for a higher minimum wage. Summarizing this position, an attendee stated, “IS needs to go beyond bottom line issues.” Others wanted Independent Sector to be more aggressive in pursuing sector-specific topics; another attendee, for example, said, “IS should advocate for increased pay-out rates for foundations.”
- 2. Social Compact** – A conversation unfolded around the question of ‘what we want society to look like’ and what roles are most appropriate for government, business, and the nonprofit sector. The discussion was free flowing and ranged widely, but ultimately two distinct sides emerged (much like the public policy dialogue above). Some people argued that Independent Sector should take a stance in the debate on the social compact, even if doing so required it to assume an ideological position. In contrast, another cohort argued that Independent Sector should remain “ideologically neutral” so that it could continue its current role as an effective bridge between groups with different views on the social compact.
- 3. Branding/Communications** – Raising the visibility of the sector was another key theme. Several participants encouraged Independent Sector to play a larger role to brand the sector. They shared concerns that the general public didn’t fully grasp the breadth/depth of good work performed by the sector (and how difficult it can be to sustain such work financially).
- 4. Sector Health** – Attendees asked Independent Sector to “keep the sector honest and accountable.” A similar comment was aired in Silicon Valley and other Threads cities. This theme is likely a result of Independent Sector’s long-time emphasis on ethical practice, captured in its *Principles for Good Governance and Ethical Practice*. The document outlines 33 principles related to legal compliance, public disclosure, and transparency.⁵

⁵ <https://www.independentsector.org/accountability>