



INDEPENDENT
SECTOR

THREADS

WEAVING THE FABRIC OF A STRONGER FUTURE.

NEW YORK HIGHLIGHTS



THREADS NEW YORK

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Event held at the Ford Foundation
March 24, 2015

At Threads New York, participants generously shared their thoughts on obstacles we face, opportunities we have, and how we, as a sector, can move ahead together. What follows are the major themes and personal reflections that emerged from the field.

TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHARITABLE SECTOR

Diana Aviv, Independent Sector's president and CEO, presented [Nine Trends shaping our shared future](#). Participants responded during a plenary discussion with additional insight:

- Millennials see business as a vehicle for social change, which will have an impact on our sector
- The trend on persistent and growing inequality in our society is a critical issue to address, especially as working class families are increasingly segregated out of mainstream society and its benefits
- If nonprofit and foundations don't transition their work to keep up with a changing world, we will be left behind

CHALLENGES

During the event, participants convened in small groups to identify challenges at three levels: individual organizations, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, and society at large. The summary below combines the first two categories as challenges identified have both organizational and sector-wide implications.

ORGANIZATION & SECTOR LEVEL

Major Themes

1. Financial Sustainability – Many participants agreed that nonprofits often lack adequate resources to meet current needs and prepare for the future. Funding from government and other sources often doesn't cover costs. Making matters worse, current funding practices often perpetuate competition, reward short-term approaches, and discourage innovation.
2. Operations and Governance – There was an acknowledgement of how important and difficult it is to ensure visionary leadership and operational excellence at the same time. Some participants articulated a danger in focusing on institution-building at the expense of externally-focused programs, while others called for greater investment in organizational capacity in order to ensure effective execution. Attendees also discussed shortfalls in board leadership that included a lack of diversity and informed oversight.
3. Relationships among Sector Organizations – Redundancies and overlapping efforts, participants said, should be addressed. They also highlighted territorialism and a lack of collaboration.
4. Vision – Participants spoke eloquently about the need to elevate our practices by focusing more on the long-term and on impact. Added to this, participants noted that sector organizations “don't think big enough” or assume a “defensive crouch” – in essence, take a reactive stance and shy away from the power that we have.
5. Talent and Workforce – Attracting and supporting staff emerged as an important challenge for sector organizations, both inspiring front-line workers and developing the diverse leaders of the future.

Other critical themes that surfaced at Threads New York included: complex, burdensome government regulations and reporting requirements that often smother nonprofits; the challenges of creating meaningful evaluation measures; and the need for a deep understanding of and partnership with the communities we serve.

Voices from the Field

- "Building institutions requires different skills than creating movements, how can we support both?"
- "We serve people, but may not represent them. Are we talking over and around people affected? Focus should be on impact."
- "Sector is very territorial, to its own detriment."
- "There's been a movement toward great collaboration from funders but incentives and infrastructure to collaborate are not always there."
- "Big data does not equal big understanding."
- "Lack of professional and financial resources impedes our ability to change, engage in updated technology, pursue the community impacts, become more outcome driven, keep staff stable, and provide training."
- "[We] don't think big enough when advocating and requesting resources from government and others."
- "[One challenge is] keeping staff on the front lines excited, hopeful and engaged. Frontline staff do the toughest work in the sector. They are often the lowest paid, most inconvenienced, and often working with problems that have few perfect answers (few to none)."
- "Collaboration [is] still a structural problem in how we are organized. Competition is issue. Overlapping work."
- "Measuring impact: need to prove to funders and audiences how their funding/experience of our work improves quality of life - currently no consistent mechanism for doing so."
- "[We often put] answers before questions. We want results and answers before we actually understand what questions will be effective to be asking."
- "[We often] value immediate results over long term impact. Metrics and results seem to be more valued in the immediate or short term rather than an understanding that impacts and their effects are often not realized on short horizons, but take time."

SOCIETAL LEVEL

At Threads New York, we asked participants to look beyond challenges at the organizational and sector level by thinking about broader difficulties they faced.

Major Themes

1. Culture – Our values are shifting. Many noted that societal mores today tend to elevate the individual and herald commercial success rather than focusing on the collective good. Others were troubled by the rapid pace of change that creates an obsession with “the new.” The result: a lack of regard for how the past shapes our communities in profound ways.
2. Brand of the Sector – Participants discussed a lack of understanding by the general public and policy makers about the sector’s role and impact in society. Because of this, people don’t view the sector as an “entity to address world problems,” said one individual and thus they’re reluctance to support our work.
3. Inequality – Poverty and inequality were cited as profoundly important issues that cut across other trends and issues.

Other themes that surfaced included a general lack of community engagement, that people seem disengaged from political processes and isolated from one another. For example, one attendee said that the “community isn’t aware of what’s happening.” People also noted that some policy makers were ineffective because of partisan gridlock or a “lack of connection” with the very citizens they were elected to represent.

Voices from the Field

- “Structural inequality issues are overwhelming: is it clear where to start? Macro vs. micro level of problems.”
- “[Societal challenges include] poverty, inequalities, ‘oligarchical’ trends.”
- “[Today there is] less concern for the common good. More emphasis on the individual vs. common good. See in changes over last 30 years in tax codes, Citizens United, shift in tax dollars from providing affordable housing to programs to promote private home ownership.”
- “[A societal challenge is the] lack of civic engagement and civic education.”
- “Speed: the increasing speed of information and our own responses - emotional, intellectual, and action. There is no time to consider information or consider response to improved effectiveness.”
- “Branding is a sector wide challenge. Model of nonprofit is not understood by the community, purpose of nonprofit vs. for profit, value of nonprofit in the world at large today, abuses of nonprofit status. Challenges [include the] pipeline of employees, value in community, making case to those who are not recipients, misconception of how money flows in a nonprofit (inflow/outflow), public/private partnerships. Perception that services are a representation of the mission.”

BRIGHT SPOTS

Threads participants identified examples of what's working from across the sector – and noted the critical success factors.

Major Themes

1. **Community Engagement** – The most common theme that emerged from the “bright spots” was meaningful engagement with local communities. Participants talked about “building grassroots capacity” and “telling stories of the community.” The success of these examples comes from, in their view, understanding and including the communities themselves.
2. **Working Across Silos** – One way nonprofits broke down silos was to hurdle traditional confines associated with a field of practice. One attendee illustrated by describing a bakery that went beyond culinary training by also providing mental health services and housing. Another way organizations built bridges was through organizational collaboration: for example, a partnership where universities provide rehearsal space for dance companies in exchange for master classes and exposure for their students.
3. **Cross-Sector Collaboration** – Attendees discussed cross-sector partnerships with government and business, which took three forms. The first was partnerships between funders, nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses working toward a shared goal. The second involved a change in which the government released formerly unavailable assets (think big data) to the community. A final type of collaboration involved nonprofits and businesses working together in the same social good space (such as a collective focus on at-risk youth).

Other themes included success stories about using technological tools more effectively, improving internal operations through capacity building, and increasing diversity within organizations.

Voices from the Field

The Problem: A lack of diversity among business school professors.

The Solution: [The PhD Project](#), an initiative to increase the representation of African-American, Hispanic-American, and Native American business school professors.

In Their Words: “Since 1994, the PhD Project has quadrupled the number of African-American, Hispanic-American, and Native American business school professors serving as role models and mentors to the business students, attracting students to study business and preparing all students to work in a diverse environment.”

The Problem: New Yorkers wanted more say in how public money is being spent. They are often in the best position to know what their community needs most.

The Solution: [Participatory Budgeting](#) in which community members decide how NYC will spend taxpayer money. NYC has embraced this new form of democracy and civic engagement in 24 districts. The process gives real power to citizens normally not involved in the public square.

In Their Words: “[Participatory budgeting is a] new model for building power and civic engagement across diverse populations in NYC.”

The Problem: Structural racism.

The Solution: The [Organization for Black Struggle](#) and [Black Lives Matter](#) are employing innovative strategies to embrace organizations with similar objectives and using holistic approaches to help enact reform against prejudice and oppression profoundly needed across the nation.

In Their Words: “Innovative organizing connecting religions, established community based organizations, new organizers in Ferguson, MO, and in the broader #blacklivesmatter movement. The Organization for Black Struggle (one of the older organizations) and some of the religious sector were able to build with and coalesce around the unaffiliated youth organizers in Ferguson.”

The Problem: For years, childhood obesity was on the rise in Philadelphia.

The Solution: [Get Healthy Philly](#), a ground breaking public health initiative, has helped reduce obesity by nearly 5% in grades K through 12.

In Their Words: “Great public health commissioner; talented team; mayoral leadership; partners with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and with the federal government, specifically the Center for Disease Control. Blending public and private money.”

The Problem: People fail to recognize the broad impact of art on their community.

The Solution: [Americans for the Arts](#), among others, is repositioning art organizations to showcase the ways they stimulate economic development.

In Their Words: “Economic development [takes place when the] theater is no longer empty. Arts have been rebranded as a workforce development, community development, and civil liberties.”

The Problem: One in six people require legal care to be healthy. In other words, our health is often contingent on our surroundings – the social and environmental factors that impact our lives. Medical problems are often a result of legal issues.

The Solution: The [National Center for Medical Legal Partnerships](#) provides legal services to hospital patients in 36 states.

In Their Words: “Hospitals, because of changes in health care landscape, are recognizing the importance of [medical-legal] services and realizing it helps patients and makes good business sense. This is a new model of social welfare and social change that is spreading throughout the country. Funding comes from hospitals’ and foundations’ exponential growth over 14 years.”

INDEPENDENT SECTOR RESPONDING TO CHANGE

During the final conversation of the event, Diana Aviv solicited input on what should be Independent Sector’s role in supporting the sector. Comments from participants spanned several issues, including:

- Convening sector organizations and helping to explore possibilities related to increasing different types of collaborations
- The critical need to stay focused on public policy and advocacy that supports the sector
- The opportunity to look broadly at how our democracy is functioning, including examining the complex barriers that separate policy makers from those they represent