

Weaving Social Innovation Communities During Times of Disruption

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Abstract

In a time of disruption, how do our social innovation organizations maintain the enabling conditions for productivity, commitment, creativity, and purpose? In this article I summarize the practical wisdom shared with me during twelve online dialogues convened from 2018 to 2020. Highly experienced and effective network designers and facilitators (“netweavers”) discussed how they addressed challenges to their efforts to pursue social justice and ecological and economic well-being while working remotely within collaborative learning networks. I provide their own verbatim advice on how to catalyze creativity and impact within a highly dispersed innovation community, and offer 27 actionable steps organized under four headings that address: (1) how to show up in your organization, (2) how to organize so governance and creativity becomes self-generating, (3) how to manage your organization over time, and (4) how to manage during shock and stress. These ideas can help sustain the ability of your organization to pursue effective strategies to address seemingly intractable problems, adapt to changing conditions and new contexts, scale innovation, and respond rapidly to crisis.

Keywords: netweavers, collaborative learning networks, disruption, social innovation, collective innovation

Introduction

The Covid-19 virus has been both contagious and disruptive. We wanted our social innovation organizations to sustain their energy and commitment during the pandemic, even as we hunkered down in our home offices. How could we maintain the enabling conditions for productivity, commitment, creativity, and purpose? We wanted to engage face-to-face and work shoulder-shoulder in teams - but we could only interact via computer screens. Now we are seeing the threat of contagion passing, and we return to a different world, one disrupted by new models for community and connection. Pursuing the common good relies on motivated individuals whose ability to work together is grounded in shared sense of camaraderie, belonging, and collective identity (Lim and Ong 2019). These qualities were vulnerable to disruption when we were separated and shut down and can be hard to start up again. In addition, capacities we acquired during the quarantine will persist and change the way we work, learn, share, and commune. We need to re-learn how to organize and manage our social innovation communities.

And truthfully, even before this crisis most of us were not so sure how to develop and maintain capacity for social innovation. We know the basic requirements for collective innovation, such as creativity and trust, and we know that these requirements are contingent on things like

organizational structure and environmental context (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). What we lack is practical knowledge of how to organize and sustain our creativity and impact within this complex social reality. While research on innovation is helpful it often focuses on innovative ideas rather than the process of supporting their development and spread, and on the work of individual entrepreneurs rather than collectives (Nilsson and Paddock 2014). We are unsure how to organize to achieve our goals - a survey of 145 non-profit leaders revealed that only about 40% of us even think that our organizations are set up to innovate to achieve positive social impact (Seelos and Mair 2012). Since we are not sure how to pursue social innovation during normal times, it's even harder to know how to maintain and grow that capacity during and after a global calamity.

To address this need, the five articles in this section of the Social Innovations Journal special issue offer the insights of highly experienced and effective network designers and facilitators, or “netweavers”, who have been managing work remotely within collaborative learning networks. While learning networks can be powerful engines for systems change (Goldstein and Butler 2009, 2010), they take special skill and attention to promote collective action among people who work in different places and organizations while pursuing a shared system change vision. Netweavers have timely ideas to share with us during this crisis, and during whatever follows.

Defining social innovation:

Social innovation is a broader concept than private sector innovation, which is the ability to transform knowledge and ideas into new products, processes, and systems to benefit both the company and its stakeholders (Lawson & Samson, 2001). The aspect of social innovation I am focusing on in this series is innovation for systems change, the ability to “Create new approaches to intractable problems, adapt programs to changing conditions, apply effective principles to new contexts (scaling innovation), catalyze systems change, and improvise rapid responses in crisis conditions.” (Patton, Michael Q. et al. 2015: vii). Expanding on this definition, Westley and McGowan (2017) suggest that social innovations share these characteristics:

- Oriented not only to solve problems, but to address their underlying causes and the structures and relationships that sustain them;
- Disruptive or challenging to existing cultural or social rules and relationships
- Generally transcend the efforts of individuals;
- May be characterized as regime shifts, which are simultaneous reconfigurations of multiple social elements;
- Arise from combining and recombining ideas, resources, and; routines/technologies borrowed from the “adjacent possible” (Kauffman 2000), the obtainable possibilities hovering on the edges of the present state of things.

Methods

The insights presented in this 5-article series here came from twelve online dialogues convened from 2018-2020, where highly experienced weavers of learning networks discussed the challenges of building and maintaining change-making networks. The five netweavers and their organizations were:

- [Stuart Cowan: Founding Convener of the Regenerative Communities Network](#)
- [Gail Francis: Strategic Director of the RE-AMP Network](#)
- [Michelle Medley-Daniel: Director of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network](#)
- [Curtis Ogden: Organizing team of Food Solutions New England](#)
- [Sarah Ann Shanahan: Director of Community Management for the RE-AMP Network](#)

In addition, six other netweavers were invited to participate in one dialogue each:

- [Lalo Bone: Manager of the Cuba Fisheries Network at Environmental Defense](#)
- [Kevin Chang: Executive Director, Kua‘āina Ulu ‘Auamo \(KUA\) Indigenous Peoples Networks](#)
- [Karen Hardigg: Coalition Director, Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition](#)
- [Abbey Smith: Director of the Savory Global Network, Savory Institute](#)
- [Paul Nelson, Network Manager, 100 Resilient Cities Network](#)
- [Emily Bateson, Director of Network for Landscape Conservation: Center for Large Landscape Conservation](#)

In total, nine 90-minute guided conversations were convened over the eighteen months of the project to share ideas about how to maintain lively, generative networks, with core questions that included:

- What are the essential personal qualities that you bring to your work?
- How do you support a generative community?
- How do you know your efforts are succeeding?
- How do you nurture your community over time?

[Here](#) is a visual record of each of these conversations created by our graphic scribe [Emma Ruffin](#), accompanied by the core questions from each dialogue.

In October 2019, the group flew to Santiago, Chile, where we spent a day reviewing preliminary results and refining the preliminary analysis. We also co-presented preliminary findings in a workshop at the [Transformation 2019 Conference](#).

Each conversation was recorded and transcribed, and the results were coded and analyzed using [Delve](#) content analysis software. The articles in this series contain the principal ideas from this analysis, through direct quotations from the netweavers, along with my commentary and analysis.

Summary

These 5 articles provide 27 actionable steps organized under four headings that address:

- How you should show up in your network (Paper 2: Love and Discord: Creating Passion Through Leadership);
- How to organize your network so it becomes self-generating (Paper 3: Jumpstart Virtuous Cycles);
- How to manage your community over time (Paper 4: Maintaining Innovative Potential Over Time), and;
- How to manage your community during shock and stress (Paper 5: System Weaving During Crisis).

Here is a summary of these 27 action steps:

Paper 2: Love and Discord: Creating Passion Through Leadership

Bring love to your leadership

Lead from behind, and when the time comes, let go of control

Model the selfless behaviors you want to see by gradually introduce power sharing when your organization is ready for it.

Tell the truth about yourself and others

Be open to seeing others as they are accepting what you see, and sharing what you are seeing, since telling them the truth demonstrates your trust.

Appreciate the whole person

Support people in your organizations as whole persons, which complements your connection to your ability to enjoy your work, respect who you work with, and believe in what you do together.

Invite in the whole person through rituals, art, and dialogue

Storytelling, rituals, and art can help create a safe and welcoming space where people feel comfortable and needed, and able to connect to what they feel is lost in society and themselves.

Maintain your remote relationships through brief, highly personal exchanges

Maintaining remote connection is best done through authentic personal connections that reaffirm the relationship, and just as you would with a friend, don't try to make every relationship operate on the same schedule or in the same way.

Embrace diversity and disruption

Engage many kinds of diversity to generate productive friction

Seek difference in your community to avoid "othering" or narrow perspectives: these differences could be functional, sectoral, epistemic, or based in personal identity and experience.

Operate within a pluriverse, balancing diversity with unity

Lack of diversity can create brittleness and a lack of systemic intelligence, while too much can create chaos and inefficiencies: in a pluralistic framework people see each other as legitimate participants and feel safe to share their differences.

Nurture your productive disruptors and maintain generative tension

Too much mutual support can create an echo chamber - you need to support disruptors who keep things from getting too comfortable by questioning assumptions and pushing against groupthink.

Paper 3: Jumpstart Virtuous Cycles Within Social Innovation Communities

Create virtuous cycles in your community

Once established, a virtuous cycle becomes self-perpetuating, since it is woven into the culture of the community as members "pay it forward" to new members, strengthening ties and establishing trust, building internal alliances, and reducing power imbalances

Initiate a virtuous cycle by example

You can initiate a virtuous cycle of mutual giving and receiving by being the first to provide many things of value, including technical knowledge, financial resources, political support, mentorship, and recognition.

Strengthen your virtuous cycles through co-work

Co-work is coherent enough so that teams can share feedback and support while being flexible enough to give them the freedom to apply the guidelines to their circumstances.

Pursue the ultimate virtuous cycle: shared governance

Cultivating your members so that they can take on governance responsibility requires leadership that maintains a reciprocal flow between freedom and guidance – you guide your community by understanding what they need and what they can provide, and you trust them to take responsibility for identifying and pursuing their own needs.

Paper 4: Maintaining Innovative Potential Over Time

Choose an appropriate suite of innovations

Develop a portfolio of innovations that enable you to pursue a range of innovative possibilities

Be open to chance and opportunity when you identify and pursue possible innovations and be sensitive to the potential of some innovations to disrupt desirable aspects of the status quo.

Co-work can build the foundations for deeper change

Co-work can enable you to both probe the system for opportunities for change and pursue deeper, harder-to-achieve leverage points for change by building on easier-to-achieve, shorter-term innovations.

Engage your membership to enhance their innovative potential

When the initial rush of enthusiasm passes you need to create opportunities for interaction

Community growth can cause a falling-off of excitement and initiative among your early adopters, so keep them engaged by promoting ongoing connection, while remaining an exciting place for newcomers.

Begin with cohesion and alignment, and become less cohesive as you progress

While social innovation communities often begin with clarity and a well-defined mission, counter-intuitively, you may need to become less structured over time as you cultivate less clarity on how to achieve your objectives, which develops your dynamic capacity for risk-taking in uncertainty.

Think of your community as something that creates thriving in the larger system, not an end in itself

Adapt your approach to where your systems lie in the adaptive cycle and have no hesitation in changing or terminating your efforts when they no longer generate innovation.

Generate useful and timely rapid feedback from your community to stay aligned with your evolving goals

Build capacity to self-assess “flow”

Flow is an underlying energetic dynamic, an immersive feeling of being focused and engaged, so the people who can best evaluate flow are embedded in the organization.

Allow community evaluation measures to emerge from community interaction

Track internal measures of your community’s health that come easily to hand from your core position in your community and focus on indicators that enhance your community’s capacity to self-assess, hold one another accountable, and develop capacity for self-governance.

Paper 5: System Weaving During Crisis

After a shock, provide support, engage your members deeply, and support collective action

People rely on existing connections and communications infrastructure during a crisis

Your prior work to build communications infrastructure can really prove useful during a crisis – even elements that you might thought as redundant or unnecessary.

Your organization can be a source of immediate emotional support

If your organization is grounded in strong personal relationships, your people will turn to one another for support during a crisis.

You should support your people by enabling them to honestly be present in in whatever way works for them

Be very explicit about a change in your expectations, since people may still try to abide by previous organizational norms – try some playful techniques to enable people to show up in different ways and be open to how they feel.

You can provide your members guidance without being overly directive by inviting them to engage in deeper reflection

The goal is not to direct people or drive them toward a common strategy, but to enhance their capacity to engage deeply with one another - these capacities enable your members to be more effective in the moment and to have the confidence to act without explicit direction in ways that align with the collective possibilities for systems change.

Be open to fleeting opportunities to pursue change during a crisis, without being overly prescriptive

Once your members had gotten over the initial shock, transition them into exploring new opportunities, acknowledging the losses as well as the opportunities that exist when the system may be open to change.

In response to systemic stress, be open to making fundamental changes

The first challenge is to accept that you may need to make fundamental changes to your organization

Create a safe place to broaden and re-frame your theory of change to acknowledge the experiences and the realities of different communities, orient to the systemic challenge, question and change their own attitudes and behavior, deliberate alternatives, and act in purposeful ways that are within their grasp

Broaden inclusion to enhance understanding of how to bring about more fundamental change

Rather than just about bringing new people into the strategy or narrative that you've created, develop a deeper reflective understanding of the relationship between your mission and their needs, even if they aren't exactly mission aligned

Once you accept that addressing systemic racism is a difficult task and a long-term goal, you can focus on supporting the loving relationships that are required to begin the work

Feel your way through the complexity by leaning into love through your full feelings, which are the keys to your deeper intelligence

Conclusion

In a time of disruption our work is important like never before. We need to sustain the ability of our social innovation organizations to pursue effective strategies in some of the arenas most heavily impacted by the pandemic, including social justice, environmental conservation, improved health, arts and culture, and education. We also need to seize the moment to pursue fundamental change by challenging underlying beliefs and relationships that structure the world. The pressure is on and the stakes are very high, even while social innovation is even more challenging to perform.

The five articles in this section of the Social Innovations Journal special issue offer the insights of highly experienced and effective netweavers, who help people working in different places and organizations pursue a common mission for systems change mission. The 27 action steps that emerged from their 3-year dialogue can provide useful guidance for social innovators who are wrestling with the challenges of purposefully changing the world while it undergoes massive and disruptive change.

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