

# What's Needed Now Are Social Innovations

**SAM DALEY-HARRIS<sup>1</sup>**

Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation  
Washington, DC 20036, USA

## Starting Point

It was about 15 years ago that Robert L. Schwartz stepped to the podium to introduce Muhammad Yunus before a speech at the State of the World Forum. I had heard Prof. Yunus introduced many times before, but never like this. Schwartz, who had a distinguished career as a journalist and publishing executive including a stint as an editor at *Time* magazine, had also founded the Tarrytown Conference Centre in New York. In his introduction Schwartz outlined seven physical innovations and inventions that allowed for the development of the modern city. He cited steel frame construction and the elevator which enabled the building of skyscrapers and spoke about other innovations like the subway.

Then he said that what the world needs now, more than ever, are not so much the physical innovations, but social innovations like Muhammad Yunus has created with the Grameen Bank. I believe that if Schwartz were introducing Professor Yunus today, he would add “more than ever the world needs social innovations like the one Prof. Yunus is creating with his latest concept: social business.”

---

<sup>1</sup> He is CEO of the Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation (A Project of RESULTS Educational Fund), 1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036, USA. He is the founder of RESULTS (1980), the Microcredit Summit Campaign (1995), and the Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation (2012). Contact Tel: 202-390-0012; Email: [sam@empoweringcitizens365.org](mailto:sam@empoweringcitizens365.org)

## **The Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation (CCET)**

This same contrast, the distinction between physical and social innovation, is at the heart of my latest initiative, the Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation (CCET). After founding RESULTS, the citizen lobby on ending global poverty 32 years ago, and then founding the Microcredit Summit Campaign 17 years ago, I began looking at what my next focus would be. I asked myself this question, “Of all that you have done over the last four decades, what lights you up the most but is least implemented in the world?”

The answer was clear. It was the early work with RESULTS to *empower citizens in having breakthroughs with their elected officials and the media* that inspired me the most and is still so desperately missing in the world. What kind of breakthroughs am I talking about?

It was volunteers in RESULTS who persuaded editorial writers from 28 US cities to join a conference call with Muhammad Yunus in 1987, 19 years before he received the Nobel Peace Prize. One could say that conference call technology was a physical innovation, but the training and coaching that enabled volunteers to get dozens of editorial writers on the phone with Prof Yunus was a social innovation and breakthrough of a wholly different order. The physical innovations are important but they can languish until there is an effective mobilisation. For example, Edward Jenner’s smallpox vaccine was developed in 1796 but smallpox was not eradicated until 181 years later when the World Health Organization mobilised an effective global eradication program.

My aim with the Centre for Citizen Empowerment and Transformation is to help non-governmental organizations (NGOs) find and train that small percentage of their members who want to go far beyond mouse-click advocacy in order to create champions in Congress and the media for their cause. But what I mostly encounter are organizations enamoured by the latest physical innovations: Facebook, Twitter, e-mails, on-line petitions, and text messages, but that are mistrustful of or uneasy about a focus on personal empowerment and transformation, uncomfortable with the social innovations. Advances like Twitter and on-line petitions are widely misnamed “social media” but in fact they can help people avoid the deepest interpersonal social interactions on which true change so often depends. I may be alone when I say this, but I agree with Schwartz, it is the truly social innovations that are most needed today. Let me explain what I mean.

An inventor can develop a breakthrough in solar technology, but if our governments continue to deny or downplay the role greenhouse gasses play in climate change, we are doomed. A researcher can discover a vaccine that will prevent an intractable disease, but if our governments can't find the political will to make its dissemination a priority and if nations and communities can't build the social structure and outreach necessary to ensure its use, then the innovation will lie dormant. If the ten nations of the world that spend the most on defence can allocate over US\$1 trillion a year combined and there is little or no outcry for a change in priorities then how will we ever be good stewards of this planet?

As with any innovation, especially social innovations, there are the early adopters and there are those who sit on the sidelines waiting to see if it works. Up until now, my only experience with citizen empowerment and transformation strategies that CCET is working to promulgate has been with RESULTS some 30 years ago and with the Citizens Climate Lobby (CCL) over the last five years. In both cases the work was with start-ups. Now I am working to bring these innovations to established organizations. How did the work with CCL begin?

In 2007 businessman and RESULTS volunteer Marshall Saunders came to me for assistance. Years earlier Saunders had been inspired by Grameen Bank and had started his own microcredit program in Mexico, *Grameen del la Frontera*. Years later he saw the Al Gore documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" three times over a 10-day period. When he learned that much of the work of microcredit programs in Bangladesh could be wiped out if millions of people were under water as a result of climate change, he went to Nashville, Tennessee, to be trained by Gore to lead the slide show.

Saunders returned to his home in San Diego, California, and led the presentation 43 times. Early on he realised that the slide show was almost exclusively focused on the problem of climate change and included very little on what people could do about it. He also knew that participants could not change enough light bulbs or buy enough Toyota Prii to make up for what the government was or wasn't doing. Just as RESULTS worked to create the political will to end poverty, he knew that there had to be a major effort to create the political will to ensure a sustainable climate.

Saunders approached a number of large environmental organizations and asked them to start a small program that would train a portion of their members to go

far beyond mouse-click advocacy and become deep advocates on this issue. They all said no.

This is when Saunders asked me to coach him on starting the Citizen Climate Lobby. When he called there were no volunteers, no groups - not even a serious mailing list. What he did have was his commitment, his experience with RESULTS, and his radical honesty with himself and with what he saw in the world as best expressed in this statement by futurist and inventor R Buckminster Fuller: "The things to do are the things that need doing; that you see need to be done and that no one else seems to see needs to be done." Saunders saw something that needed to be done and either very few others saw what he saw or, if they did, few had any hope in finding an effective way to address it.

What is critical to this equation is not just the first purpose of RESULTS and CCL, creating the political will to end poverty or creating the political will to ensure a sustainable climate. Perhaps even more important is the second purpose which is to empower individuals to have breakthroughs in expressing their personal and political power. I believe that this second purpose is the essence of Schwartz's call for social innovations, innovations that empower individuals in having breakthroughs in expressing their personal and, in the case of RESULTS and the CCL, their political power. Isn't that what Grameen Bank did? It wasn't just focused on giving loans and taking savings, it was focused on doing so in a way that unleashed the personal power of its members, unleashed the human spirit. Here are some examples of Citizen Climate Lobby's success during its young life:

CCL's first chapters were started in September 2007. By August 2012, CCL had grown to more than 60 chapters in the US and Canada. In 2011 CCL had 255 meetings with members of Congress or their staff. In the first seven months of 2012 there had already been 437 meetings. In 2011 CCL volunteers had 181 letters to the editor published. In the first seven months of 2012 there had already been 234 letters published. One can conservatively estimate that more than 1,000 letters would have to have been written and sent for 234 to have been selected for publication. And what is the impact of these letters? Just ask the legislators whose constituencies read them and begin to re-evaluate their representatives on the basis of what they have read. What kind of social innovation is required to awaken and empower volunteers to address the climate crisis in the political arena like this?

One of the ingredients is a deep structure of support, an ongoing system of inspiring conference calls, coaching calls, and printed materials. During 2012 I have met with dozens of non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders from groups both large and small. I have met with the leaders of organizations that have millions of stakeholders and some that have thousands. At a meeting with the CEO of one of the smaller organizations, a group with an annual budget that might not be much greater than US\$1.5 million and a staff of no more than seven, the CEO explained that the organization did not have the budget or staff to take on a new program to empower their rather large grassroots base, large for the group's staff size. I found myself agreeing with the leader during the meeting only to realise on the train ride home that the group's budget was 100 times greater than that of RESULTS in its early years and that RESULTS had no full-time paid staff during its first four and a half years. What RESULTS did have was an ethos and commitment to breakthroughs and to empowering extraordinary citizen action.

It is true that one cannot expect a large NGO to launch a major grassroots empowerment and transformation initiative on a shoestring budget. Just because RESULTS was able to do it 30 years ago one can understand a large organization's trepidation about going down this path. Even so, I still wanted to better understand what commitments were required for success and began making a list. While some of these commitments are only relevant for advocacy work, there should be some relevance and insights for any new initiative.

The first commitments on the list have more to do with the organizational infrastructure that is required to succeed. These first commitments will filter to the volunteers, but are still a bit more foundational in nature.

### **Inspiration and Idealism**

Being at peace with and confident in one's idealism and vision and one's commitment to inspiring others is critical. This idealism includes holding ourselves to our fullest potential and our governments to their greatest ideals. If government is broken, we are part of that brokenness and must heal ourselves first. In working with grassroots advocates one can often hear a staff member say, "People are too busy to get involved." People *are* too busy for gestures, for going through the motions, but there are some who are not too busy to make a real difference. One's idealism and inspiration should not be surrendered to reason or to the petty pace of everyday life. The dictionary defines "inspire" as to fill with an animating, quickening, or exalting influence; to influence or impel. The purpose of deep advocacy is to influence or impel, to change hearts and

minds. That cannot be done with facts and figures alone. The urgency of the need for change must also be conveyed with inspiration. When a conference call or group leader call agenda is being created, it must be filled not only with accurate information but also with moments that truly inspire and move the volunteers and staff.

## **A Powerful Structure of Support**

This was touched on earlier, but if greatness is expected from volunteers then a great structure of coaching and empowerment will be required from the organization and its staff. Among the failures of grassroots empowerment is the myth that all volunteers need is a training session on meeting a member of Congress, a packet of materials, and a sense that their cause is just. But this analysis ignores the heavy layer of cynicism and despair found in each of us and in society. Each of the items mentioned in this list comes to life in a powerful structure of support which includes inspiring monthly conference calls for groups, weekly coaching calls for group leaders, brilliant coaching, monthly action sheets, and packets for editorial writers. Without that all of the commitments listed below become interesting ideas that are seldom implemented. But with a profound structure of support people are empowered to live a life aligned with these words from George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, the being a force of nature, instead of a selfish, feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me, it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

## **Selecting the Right Staff**

Another critical ingredient is selecting the right staff. One must select a staff that is entrepreneurial, unstoppable, and inspiring or committed to learning to be more inspiring. Building a unit that truly delivers citizen empowerment and transformation requires the commitment of a successful start-up. No matter how good the coaching, if the staff is not entrepreneurial and unstoppable and

is not committed to being inspiring, the effort will not succeed. There must be a perceived pain that this program will relieve and a true sense of mission and calling that goes far beyond the effort put into a typical 9-5 job. There must be an attitude of “we will get this done, no matter what.” The staff must own the vision completely as any great entrepreneur would do and be persistent in the face of opposition.

### **Focused, Inspiring Agenda**

Another piece of the organizational DNA and a clear failure of deep grassroots empowerment is the lack of legislative focus and the mistaken belief that if there is one major issue that is returned to throughout the year, the volunteers will become bored. That is only true if the grassroots are given a simple request to make over and over on the same issue. But if the groups are not just trying to get a co-sponsor on a bill but are instead working to really create champions in Congress, the media, and among community leaders, to take a little known issue and make it a political imperative, then boredom will not be a problem. Developing a legislative agenda that is inspiring and focused allows volunteers to drill down deep on an issue rather than flit from issue to issue and allows volunteers to be moved by their own growth as community leaders.

### **Practice and Coaching**

One of the great challenges to the future of our planet is our short attention span. But when one has a 20-30 minute meeting with a member of Congress, editorial writer or other community leader, what had been a superficial understanding can now go much deeper. But this is only possible if the volunteer has practiced and prepared and has something profound to offer. Practice builds confidence and develops one’s leadership. We shy away from arranging a meeting with a Member of Congress, writing a letter to the editor or calling into a talk-show because we think we don’t know what to say. Only real practice can change that. The organization must be committed to ensuring the volunteers have ongoing opportunities for real practice in order to become spokespersons themselves. This call for practice includes an organizational commitment to improvement, coaching, and being coached.

### **Integrity**

Volunteers are giving a very precious commodity, their time. There must be a deep commitment as an organization and as individuals to keeping your word,

being someone who can be counted on. If there is a conference call, be on time and deliver a quality agenda. If there is an action sheet, have it arrive on time and be both accurate and inspiring. One could say that global poverty and a deteriorating environment are the result of a lack of integrity on a global scale. They cannot be solved by individuals and organizations that have questionable integrity.

These next commitments are a promise to the volunteers, a stand for a program that delivers excellence.

### **Empowering Breakthroughs**

For a citizen to go from not knowing the name of their member of Congress to having a deep, trusted relationship with them requires a series of breakthroughs - it requires moving out of your comfort zone. That is essentially the definition of a breakthrough, seeing something that seems difficult or impossible, having some discomfort in taking it on, and then, with coaching and support, going through that comfort zone to experience the joy and accomplishment on the other side. These breakthroughs can happen with a member of Congress, with an editorial writer, with other leaders in the community, and with oneself. Empowering others in this way and providing opportunities for them to express their greatness is one of the gifts of deep advocacy.

### **Enrolling Others**

Engaging other community members in being empowered volunteers is part of the structure of support. If I invite a friend to a meeting there is always the fear that they will say no or that they will come and see this as a useless activity. When volunteers become senior to that fear, when the commitment to the purpose and vision is greater than the fear of rejection, then big things can happen.

### **Building Deep Relationships**

When an op-ed is selected for publication it has less to do with the quality of the op-ed and more to do with the relationship one has developed with the op-ed editor. Of course timing and quality are important, but I would rather have 10 people who have great, trusted relationships with op-ed editors pitch a *good* op-ed rather than send a *great* op-ed to 10 editors with whom there is no relationship. So the commitment is not so much to having an editorial writer or

member of Congress say yes to every request, but to building a deep, trusting relationship. Hearing “no” from a member of Congress early on should be seen as just one step along the path to building a great relationship over time. Here is how Elli Sparks, a volunteer leader with the Citizens Climate Lobby, described her search for a model for building deep relationships:

...[O]ur director Mark Reynolds likes to say, “We’re betting the farm on relationships.” Then he tells us that we need to build relationships with members of Congress and editorial writers. Most of us CCL volunteers have never done that before!! What in the world does a relationship with a member of Congress look like? How do we connect with an editorial page editor?

Some of us have found models for those relationships in other parts of our lives. Gary in Boston uses the model of a work relationship....

My relationship model is different. I adore romantic relationships, so I use romance as my model. That first meeting with the editorial writer... it’s like a blind date, only you’ve decided beforehand you are going to marry this fellow. You are going to be sweet and interesting, but not too intense.... if it doesn't work out with the editor, you are going to marry one of his friends at the newspaper – the business editor, environmental writer, or city editor. Someone at this paper will find you interesting and compelling – it’s just a matter being persistent until you find the right connection.

... I see the relationship with a member of Congress as an arranged marriage. If you live in her district, the member’s aide has to meet with you. That’s what Rep. Eric Cantor’s legislative director (LD) told us in January. Since then, we’ve met four times with the LD. We schedule 45 minute meetings with him. He keeps us for well over an hour. He doesn’t want us to leave! Why? Because a good arranged marriage starts out cold and heats up over time. That’s different than a love match, which starts out hot and slowly cools down.

...I see the editorial page writer as a painter. His canvas is the editorial pages. His pallet is filled with letters to the editor, op-eds, and editorials. I am his muse, model, and assistant... I want him to fill his canvas with colors that I like, so I’ll have my group send 3 – 5 letters to the editor whenever the opportunity arises. The more colours I put on his pallet, the better chance of having him pick one or two of my favourite colour.

... Last summer, he printed three climate denier letters from international denier groups. At first, the denier letters felt like a blow to the gut. Then, I dug deep for the love language... My editor was proud of his work in standing up for the climate. Those denier letters were in response to his own articles encouraging conservatives to help conserve the climate. He had been courageous in writing those editorials. He was getting national attention because of them. He was not backing down. I thought he might enjoy a pat on the back from across the nation. I called Gary in Boston, a scientist in NY, and our CCL director [in California]. All three sent letters. All three letters were printed! I guess I was right... my editorial page editor likes national attention!!

...During our conference I met with 20 congressional offices. I met with many folks whose view of the world was very different than mine. Going into their offices was hard. I had to let go of a lot of emotional baggage. I could no longer judge them or hold hostility in my heart towards them. I had to let go of my fear of climate change and my fear that they wouldn't listen to me. I had to centre myself in love. Releasing fear and centring love... this is sacred and profound work...

## **Being Vulnerable**

Showing a moving video or reading convincingly an excerpt from an emotional article to a member of Congress is more important than just sharing information. The goal is to tap into their humanity and create a deeply memorable moment. The goal is to have them experience being in the field, right there in their office. But people shy away from being vulnerable, especially with those in positions of power. However, a willingness to be vulnerable is essential to having breakthroughs, engaging others, building powerful relationships, and, ultimately, success.

## **Partnership NOT Partisanship**

The most profound breakthroughs and transformations come when those whom we perceive as against us or our cause begin to see the truth and importance of our issue and embrace it as their own. But that can only happen through partnership, not partisanship. We must see the humanity and original goodness in each person, especially those who are seen to oppose us. In 1987 the RESULTS group in Atlanta adapted the following prayer for their own member of Congress, a prayer that had originally been written by Newton Hightower of Houston for his member of Congress. They would read this

prayer at the beginning of each of their meetings and think, “Yea, right” when they first read it. But they read it as a way of opening their hearts to the humanity of their member of Congress who had voted against famine relief for Ethiopia in 1985.

Thank you God for Pat Swindall. We know that he is a good man who wants to do right in the world. We know that he struggles with the same problems we do: closing our hearts to those who don't agree with us. There are no thoughts or feelings that he has had that we haven't had and vice versa. We pray for all of us to have compassion for people in our country and far away, for rich and poor. We pray that Pat and we will be less frightened of each other. We pray our focus will be more to love and appreciate him and less to change him. Help us to remember that sharing love with the world is the highest contribution we can make and will lead to children being fed and the planet surviving. Forgive our righteousness and anger. Open our hearts and minds to find the next expression of love for Pat that he can receive.

When we are faced with someone who appears to oppose us or our cause the normal tendency is to give up. If we don't give up we are likely to be defensive, retaliatory, or argumentative, but this seldom works. The commitment being discussed here has nothing to do with being weak or without resolve. Rather it is a clear understanding that change is not likely to occur without communication. No matter how backward one's member of Congress's views might seem, one must decide whether one wishes to be right about their backwardness or, instead, engage him or her in a deep conversation for change.

### **Being Unreasonable**

Time magazine once stated: “Visionaries are possessed creatures, men and women in the thrall of belief so powerful that that they ignore all else - even reason - to ensure that reality catches up with their dreams. But always behind the action is an idea, a passionate sense of what is eternal in human nature and also what is coming but as yet unseen, over the horizon.”

### **Humour, Joy and Celebration**

The issues of global poverty and climate change often involve addressing great personal or global pain or sounding an alarm for action on a dire and critical issue. We must not let the heaviness inherent in the task overwhelm us. Instead we must find the joy in the work so it does not become drudgery. That joy can

be found in the act of making a difference, having personal breakthroughs, assisting others in making a difference, finding partners who share one's commitment, and being inspired by living a committed life. Approaching the work with lightness and cheerfulness and celebrating the victories along the way, both large and small, will help bring joy and sustain the volunteers and staff for the long run.

### **What are People Capable Of?**

The preceding list of commitments is a tall order, but what is at stake is the quality of life on this planet and perhaps life itself. There are two competing visions of people and their ability to change the world for the better. One vision sees individuals as weak, inadequate, insufficient, inconsequential, and just not up to the job. The other sees people as being strong, committed, brave, visionary, audacious, and heroic. Honestly, when it comes to ending global poverty or ensuring a sustainable climate or sustainable peace, how do you see people? How do you see yourself?

I believe Apollo Astronaut Rusty Schweickart was correct when he said, "We aren't passengers on Spaceship Earth, we're the crew. We aren't residents on this planet, we're citizens. The difference in both cases is responsibility."

If our species is to have any hope of living up to that responsibility, of succeeding and thriving, we must see people as strong, brave, visionary, audacious, and heroic. And if we embrace that vision we must return to Robert Schwartz's assertion that now, more than ever, we need *social* innovations. I believe Schwartz would agree that my description of citizen empowerment and transformation would also describe his call for social innovation, innovations that empower individuals to have breakthroughs in expressing their personal and political power for the good of humanity. But we know that these breakthroughs do not occur spontaneously or without being nurtured. If we are to help people achieve them, we must create the profound structures of inspiration, challenge and support that enable individuals to do the work of healing creation.

---

**For information on The Journal of Social Business (JSB) –**  
Editorial Board, Call for Papers, Subscriptions, etc, please contact:  
**Zasheem Ahmed**, Phd (Econ), Managing Editor, Email:  
[zahmed@journalofsocialbusiness.net](mailto:zahmed@journalofsocialbusiness.net), or [zasheem@btinternet.com](mailto:zasheem@btinternet.com).