

HARNESSING THE POWER OF
NETWORKS FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

CONNECTING TO CHANGE THE WORLD



PETER PLASTRIK
MADELEINE TAYLOR
JOHN CLEVELAND

Advance praise for *Connecting to Change the World*

“The Millennial generation’s mission is to work together to change the world for the better. *Connecting to Change the World* is destined to become the guidebook for building the generative social networks they will use to accomplish their goal. Everyone interested in making global change happen at the local level will benefit from following the sage advice built on practical experience that permeates the pages of this book.”

– Morley Winograd, coauthor, *Millennial Momentum: How a New Generation is Remaking America*

“As government leaders steer more and row less, networks become an indispensable tool to solve complex problems and achieve critical public goals. This insightful book will tell you everything you need to know to create and use networks effectively. Beautifully written, with case studies woven throughout, it is as entertaining as it is useful. I wish I had read it twenty-five years ago!”

– David Osborne, coauthor of *Reinventing Government, Banishing Bureaucracy, The Reinventor’s Fieldbook, and The Price of Government*

“Whether you’re a social entrepreneur, a nonprofit executive, a funder, or a grassroots activist, you’ll find strategies, tools, and cases that you can use to power your vision as well as your everyday work. *Connecting to Change the World* is essential reading for anyone who’s passionate about using networks to advance social change.”

– Kathy Reich, Director of Organizational Effectiveness Grantmaking, David and Lucile Packard Foundation

“*Connecting to Change the World* provides social entrepreneurs with a powerful new tool for organizing change—the creation of generative networks that empower and unleash the complementary energies of large numbers of independent and interdependent actors. Incorporating lessons from dozens of networks in a host of fields—many of which they had a hand in improving—the authors advance the understanding and practice of an important emerging tool for social change, providing specific steps to success and important insights. I highly recommend this book to anyone serious about unleashing social change.”

– Bob Friedman, Founder and Chair, Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED); Board Member, Family Independence Initiative, Child and Youth Finance International, the Rosenberg Foundation

“Inspiring, practical advice for the most powerful pathway for social impact—the authors bring decades of deep experience in the most dynamic organizing model for creating change. This is a guidebook for twenty-first-century social transformation.”

– Graham Richard, Chief Executive Officer,
Advanced Energy Economy

“Is there a twenty-first-century blueprint for sustainable social change? If, like me, you’ve been working in the trenches to grow a new world only to be stumped by the very real barriers of weak tools—foolhardy business models, unimaginative value propositions, and the twentieth-century hangover of scale—then this is the book for you. *Connecting to Change the World* sheds light on why some organizations feel like heavy bricks, whereas others defy gravity. Read on to discover how to situate yourself to grow social change that lives on longer than we do and goes to places we hadn’t imagined.”

– Richard McCarthy, Executive Director for Slow Food USA

“The authors of *Connecting to Change the World* have rightly concluded that pooling talent and resources to address complex social and environmental problems is the only way to go. Their highly readable new book explains the art of creating collaborative solutions. Architecture 2030 is pleased to have worked with the authors when forming a national network of city-based 2030 Districts—local networks focused on carbon emissions, energy, and water reductions. We enthusiastically endorse their approach and recommend their new book to individuals and groups committed to solving problems and ensuring a positive impact.”

– Ed Mazria, Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
Architecture 2030

“An important contribution to the growing literature on networks, *Connecting to Change the World* offers startlingly useful guidance to those who need to navigate a changing new world increasingly represented by links and nodes. Avoiding the hyperbole and conjecture that sometimes accompany claims on the potential of networks, the authors rely on their research and experience to pinpoint the benefits and limitations of networks. As a person who works with policy makers and is actively engaged in philanthropy, this will become a well-worn reference book.”

–Anita R. Brown-Graham, Director, Institute for
Emerging Issues, NC State University

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Connecting to Change the World

CONNECTING TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Harnessing the Power of Networks for Social Impact

Peter Plastrik, Madeleine Taylor,
and John Cleveland



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For our children—
André, David, Emily, Josh, Lauren, Matheus,
Rachel, Sam, Steven—
and the world they are shaping

In memory of Marion Kane,
who helped us start down the network path

If you want to go quickly, go alone.

If you want to go far, go together.

— African proverb

I must confess that I've never trusted the Web. I've always seen it as a coward's tool. Where does it live? How do you hold it personally responsible? Can you put a distributed network of fiber-optic cable "on notice"? And is it male or female? In other words, can I challenge it to a fight?

— Stephen Colbert

The atom is the icon of the twentieth century. The atom whirls alone. It is the metaphor for individuality. But the atom is the past. The symbol for the next century is the net. The net has no center, no orbits, no certainty. It is an indefinite web of causes. The net is the archetype displayed to represent all circuits, all intelligence, all interdependence, all things economic, social, or ecological, all communications, all democracy, all families, all large systems, almost all that we find interesting and important.

Whereas the atom represents clean simplicity, the net channels messy complexity.

— Kevin Kelly

Introduction

Networks are present everywhere. All we need is an eye for them.

— *Albert-László Barabasi*

If you started your first job after 1990, then you missed the heyday of the organization. For much of the twentieth century, the organization was the go-to way to marshal collective energy and get things done. The world was filled with “organization men” toiling in the bowels of business corporations and government bureaucracies. A similar dynamic held when someone caught the social-change bug. They would start an organization, typically a nonprofit, appoint a board of directors that hired an executive director, obtain funds from philanthropic donors, hire staff, and initiate programs. The organization was an extension of the founder’s vision and ego. The board and managers at the top made the decisions. Social enterprises became such a large-scale phenomenon that by 2008 the United States alone was home to more than 1.5 million registered nonprofits.

But the stand-alone organization has been losing its sway over how we think about organizing our efforts. Beginning in the 1980s, the corporate business world started to question the effectiveness of its own command-and-control model. The internationally best-selling *In Search of Excellence* offered evidence that better performance can result from decentralized control, in which a business’s frontline employees, rather than bosses on high, have authority to make decisions. Tom Peters, Peter Block, Max De Pree, and other employee-empowerment gurus amplified this message

in the business-management literature. The 1997 *Fast Company* magazine cover story, “Free Agent Nation,” reported that 25 million Americans worked independently—for themselves rather than for a single employer.

Decentralization didn’t dethrone the corporate CEO and chain of command, but in the 1990s a new challenger—the network—emerged. A network is a radical version of decentralization that in its most robust form can eliminate altogether the need for an organization. For many people, the network represents an anti-organization worldview; a “net-centric” approach offers a new and better way of dealing with problems and opportunities. In 1994, Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, authors of *The Age of the Network*, declared that “the network is coming of age as a mature, useful, and pervasive form of organization. . . . Life has become too complicated for hierarchy and bureaucracy.” A few years later, Kevin Kelly, a cofounder of *Wired* magazine, heralded the rise of networks in *New Rules for the New Economy*: “The dynamic of our society, and particularly our new economy, will increasingly obey the logic of the network.” Then the power of social networks drew increasing notice in mass media headlines, from the emergence of Al Qaeda and the far-flung mobilizations of the World Social Forum and Moveon.org to the explosive growth of Howard Dean’s Internet-based presidential campaign in 2004, which used a website to grow from 3,000 members to 140,000 members in less than a year. In a blog, Dean’s campaign manager, Joe Trippi, put his finger on the difference between a tightly controlled campaign and the peer-to-peer dynamic he was unleashing for the candidate: “Every political campaign I have ever seen was built on the top-down military structure. . . . This kind of structure will suffocate the storm, not fuel it. . . . The important thing is to provide the tools and some of the direction . . . and get the hell out of the way when a big wave is building on its own.”

Around the same time, the importance of networks began trending in global thought leadership. Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* (2000) described the way that “connectors” help to produce social epidemics. Seth Godin’s *Unleashing the Ideavirus* (2001) explained how to turn ideas into epidemics by spreading them through customers’ relationships with other customers, and James Surowiecki’s *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004) brought crowdsourcing into the spotlight. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman famously announced in 2005 that “the world is flat”:

“We are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network.” *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (2002) and *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (2003) introduced the public to the science of networks—described by physicist/sociologist Duncan Watts as a “world of people, friendships, rumors, disease, fads, firms, and financial crises.”

Without anyone planning it, the network thought-wave surged in cyberspace. New Internet-based social-media tools for connecting people with each other—Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Meetup, YouTube, Twitter—met the Millennial Generation. Millennials, born between 1982 and 2003, are the largest generation of Americans ever, and connecting with each other electronically is a defining aspect of their generational culture. They have “a strong group and community orientation and a clear tendency to share their thoughts and activities with others—friends, teachers, and parents,” reported Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, authors of three books about the generation. Millennials are much less interested in building organizations than their parents were, as Beth Kanter and Allison Fine explained in *The Networked Nonprofit*: “In their world, information sharing and power has shifted toward individuals. This creates a huge distinction in their minds between a cause they’re passionate about, such as cancer research, and a stand-alone nonprofit organization they may not care about at all.”

Spurred by Millennial adoption, the spread of Web 2.0 tools drove fundamental change in how groups form and work gets done, noted Gabriel Kasper and Diana Scarce: “Social media are engendering new, networked ways of behaving—ways of *working wikily*—that are characterized by principles of openness, transparency, decentralized decision-making, and distributed action.” Tom Friedman marveled in April 2013 that, eight years earlier when he wrote *The World Is Flat*, “Facebook, Twitter, 4G, iPhones, iPads . . . the cloud, Big Data, cellphone apps, and Skype did not exist or were in their infancy.” Since then, he added, “The combination of these tools of connectivity and creativity has created a global education, commercial, communication, and innovation platform on which more people can start stuff, collaborate on stuff, learn stuff, make stuff (and destroy stuff) with more other people than ever before.” The Internet fueled what Yale law professor Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth*

of *Networks* called “the rise of effective, large-scale cooperative efforts—peer production of information, knowledge, and culture.” Exhibit A in Benkler’s analysis: 50,000 volunteers coauthor *Wikipedia* “and then turn around and give it away for free.”

With network-building reaching global scale, it’s not surprising to find networks accorded a place on the world stage alongside the nation-state. In a presentation at the TEDGlobal 2012 conference, Beth Noveck, the U.S. federal government’s first deputy chief technology officer, declared that “the next great superpower is going to be the one who can successfully combine the hierarchy of institution . . . with the diversity and pulsating life and the chaos and excitement of networks.”

What this all adds up to is the Gospel of the Network—spreading the good news that there is another way to organize the future. Claims that the organization-centric model is dead are surely an exaggeration, but the much-heralded birth of the net-centric approach is not. In a remarkably short span of time, Joe Trippi’s “big wave . . . building on its own” has arrived, flowing into every community and sector. We have crossed the threshold into what Duncan Watts called “the connected age.” The network has become a favored unit of action for people who want to make nearly any sort of difference in the world.

Social-Impact Networks

When we first wrote about networks, in 2004, we were interested in how to use them to more effectively achieve social change. We were veterans in the social-change game—starting our own nonprofits, obtaining grants from major U.S. foundations, guiding foundations and other nonprofits through strategic-planning processes, consulting with start-up social enterprises. We were intrigued by networks. At the time, though, the social-change sector focused mostly on organizations. Foundations provided billions of dollars every year to fuel social change, nearly all of it to organizations. Social entrepreneurs automatically started organizations, in part so they’d be able to obtain foundation funding. We knew Margaret Mead’s famous quotation—“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”—but we assumed without thinking that the small groups always started organizations to achieve the change.

After closely examining a handful of social-change networks in the United States, we thought they showed great potential and so we encouraged foundation and nonprofit leaders to pay attention to the emerging phenomenon. Networks, we argued, provide social-change agents with a fundamentally distinct and promising “organizing principle” to achieve ambitious goals. The civil sector was under growing pressure to do more and better. In light of government downsizing and the growing complexity of social problems, civil organizations needed ways to improve their impact, leverage, and return on funders’ investments. Nonprofits were expected to be more strategic, entrepreneurial, and high-performing. Growing doubts about the prowess of individual social-change organizations came to a head in a widely read article by John Kania and Mark Kramer that declared, “There is scant evidence that isolated initiatives are the best way to solve many social problems in today’s complex and interdependent world. No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it.”

Today the social-change landscape looks quite different. Along with the perfect storm of Millennials meeting the Internet, there has been an upwelling of social entrepreneurship worldwide—of “people who solve problems on a large scale,” as David Bornstein described them in *How to Change the World*. “More people today have the freedom, time, wealth, health, exposure, social mobility, and confidence to address social problems in bold new ways.” In this new climate for civic problem solving, networks are proliferating. “Civic revolutionaries have networks, and every person in their networks has networks,” noted the authors of *Civic Revolutionaries*. “Understanding and mobilizing these networks is the key to driving change.”

Generative Networks for Social Impact

People use the word *network* to describe many things, but this book is about something quite specific: networks of individuals or organizations that aim to solve a difficult problem in the society by working together, adapting over time, and generating a sustained flow of activities and impacts. We call these *generative social-impact networks*—“generative” because they are designed to be a platform for generating multiple, ongoing kinds of change, not just accomplishing a single outcome; “social-impact”

because they specifically focus on achieving change that results in social good. They are quite different from social-media networks like Facebook and LinkedIn and from other forms of member-based social organizing that usually get tossed into the network basket. Each of these networks is a set of people, typically numbering in the hundreds, whose connections with each other enable them to generate more and more collaborative effort over time. The members don't just connect, share, and collaborate online; they forge powerful, enduring personal relationships based on trust and reciprocity that are supported by face-to-face engagement as well as digital tools for connectivity. Nor do they come together like a coalition to tackle just one thing, like advocating for a specific government policy, and then disband; connecting makes it possible for them to undertake numerous activities, many of which emerge over the years. And they don't just gather to pool their resources to obtain services they all want, like an association; they link to enable themselves, not staff, to do the work.

A generative network is a social-relationship platform—a “human operating system”—for spawning activities. It's a unique and renewable capacity, and this makes it especially useful when taking on complex, unpredictable, large-scale problems like climate change, homelessness, or education system performance, which won't yield to a silver-bullet solution.

In the chapters that follow we'll introduce you to active, long-lived, generative social-impact networks and some of their founders, funders, and coordinators, and explain more about how they're different from other types of collective effort and what makes them tick. These networks include the following:

- The Urban Sustainability Directors Network and eight regional networks of sustainability directors—local government officials—from more than 150 cities in the United States and Canada.
- Three business-driven networks: the Partnership Fund for New York—a network of some 200 corporate and financial-institution executives, started by Henry Kravis, cofounder of the private equity firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.; Advanced Energy Economy—a U.S. association of businesses started by Tom

Steyer, founder of Farallon Capital Management; and the West Michigan Manufacturers Council—learning networks that involve dozens of medium to large manufacturers.

- Rural People, Rural Policy—five regional and two national networks of rural-based organizations, initially assembled and funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to promote public policies that benefit rural communities in the United States.
- Reboot—a network of young, Jewish-American “cultural creative” professionals in the arts and media, which explores and redefines Jewish identity and community in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- Lawrence CommunityWorks—a network of thousands of people in Lawrence, Massachusetts, established to revitalize the fading industrial community.
- RE-AMP—more than 165 nonprofit organizations and foundations in eight Midwestern states working together on climate change and energy policy.
- The Learning Network of Greater Kalamazoo—a community collaborative of dozens of local organizations and parents, students, and other individuals who share the vision that every child in the county will be “ready for school, ready for college, and ready for the world”—backed by \$11 million in grants from the Kalamazoo Community and Kellogg Foundations.
- The Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness—a state government initiative using regional networks of state agencies and nonprofit providers to test innovative services for homeless individuals and families and reduce the need for emergency assistance shelters.
- The Network of Korean American Leaders—promoting civic leadership among successful second-generation Korean American professionals, an initiative of the University of Southern California’s School of Social Work.
- The Fire Learning Network—a partnership of The Nature Conservancy and U.S. federal government land managers to transform the use of fire in ecological management.

Practice, Practice, Practice

We are network geeks, and proud of it. For more than 10 years we've studied networks, built our own, and helped others build dozens around the world. We talk about networks for hours, only to get more energized. We read the latest academic research to see what theories and models are emerging. We surf the Web to find people as obsessed as we are about understanding and building networks, and we network with them. We've learned how to use network-mapping software and to analyze the fascinating maps it produces. We blog about networks, produce online tools for assessing a network's health, coach network builders, and run workshops about building networks.

We didn't used to be net-aholics. Like everyone else, we had personal networks of friends and colleagues. We dabbled with building a few networks. Madeleine, who's an anthropologist, knew about Social Network Analysis. We had studied complexity theory, which turned out to be useful for understanding networks. When we did start paying serious attention to networks, we studied scientific theories about their unique characteristics and effects, and we got to know some on-the-ground networks. We blogged and posted reports about what we were finding out and why it was important if you wanted to produce large-scale social change. Then the magic of intentionality kicked in: broadcast your intentions to your network and it will provide opportunities to get what you want. That's been our experience. We wanted to work with networks, and a few friends responded, asking for help building new networks or resetting ones already under way. That started the first of dozens of projects in which we advised network builders.

What is there to advise about? After all, most people have networking in their blood. They know instinctively how to connect with each other, make friends, engage with colleagues, break the ice with strangers, and stay in touch. Some are superb at social bonding—"connectors," Malcolm Gladwell calls them, "people with a special gift for bringing the world together. . . . They are the kinds of people who know everyone." But, it turns out, there's much more to network building than the age-old human instinct to link.

Building a network is a *practice*. It involves particular ideas, methods,

techniques, and tools—practical knowledge that works. Much has been learned about this practice from the recent experiences of network builders themselves and from the experiments and insights of researchers in mathematics, physics, sociology, biology, computer science, and other disciplines. Knowing how to build a network doesn't require a graduate degree, but it involves a lot more than just going with the flow. This is news to many of the network builders we meet. They love building networks and they just do it. But when we probe a little, they acknowledge that they aren't sure how to handle some of the challenges that have come up during their network building, especially how to boost the network's energy and impact. And their questions come pouring out when we explain that many networks evolve through different stages that can be anticipated; that starting a network involves addressing eight distinct design issues; that developing an ongoing network requires management of four key challenges; that evaluating a network's performance is not nearly the same as evaluating an organization's performance; and that builders of networks play multiple roles, with their success depending on certain skills and a "net-centric" outlook. We also get many questions when we talk with people who are investing in the development of networks, like program officers at foundations: What results can networks produce? How is a *network* different from a *coalition*? Why does a network require so much upfront investment? How can you tell how well a network is doing?

The pages that follow will answer these and other questions and will help you to anticipate—and address—challenges that your network-building efforts are likely to encounter. The practice of building generative social-change networks can be learned and mastered. Practice it thoughtfully and you'll get better at it. That's precisely what this book will help you do, whether you're starting a network or managing one that's already up and kicking.

Eight Insights

What we know about building generative social-impact networks has been field-tested many times by network builders from all walks of life. We tap a portfolio of about 20 networks in this book, started variously by people from business, nonprofits, communities, city and state governments,

culture/arts, education, and foundations, nearly all of them clients or colleagues of ours. In our consulting practice we're contacted by network builders from around the world. And we have been fortunate to learn from other thinkers and writers about network building. It has been our privilege to work alongside all of these women and men as they invent and adapt the network way of driving social change. Wrestling with their problems in starting, managing, and resetting networks has sharpened our understanding of the essentials of network building and the powerful social impact that networks can have. (Because network building is inherently a team sport, network builders are reluctant to have their own efforts highlighted without acknowledging others' labors, too. At the risk of creating misperceptions, we've kept the book's stories about networks fairly simple by focusing on just a few of each network's builders.)

This book offers eight orienting insights about network building; each one frames a separate chapter, backed by case studies, illustrations, and how-to information.

1. **Know the Network Difference.** Networks have unique capabilities for achieving social impact that distinguish them from other forms of social organizing, and generative social-impact networks are particularly suited for addressing complex problems.
2. **Design Thoughtfully.** Social-impact networks can be thoughtfully designed from the start; you don't have to fly blind.
3. **Connect, Connect, Connect.** The foundation of generative social-impact networks is the connectivity of its members to each other, which can be cultivated by network weavers.
4. **Anticipate a Network's Evolution.** A generative network's capabilities, complexity, and potential for impact increase as the connectivity of its members deepens and the structure of their connectivity evolves.
5. **Enable and Adapt.** The growth and development of established social-impact networks depend on managing a set of inevitable challenges.

6. **Assess to Improve.** Monitoring and assessing a social-impact network's condition and performance is the basis for improving its impact.
7. **Revisit Design.** Making an existing network more generative, with more engaged members and impact, requires resetting of key design decisions to boost members' connectivity.
8. **Be Network-Centric.** In addition to skills and knowledge, network builders hold a distinct net-centric point of view with its own rules.

The flow of chapters traces the life cycle of network building, from designing start-up networks to managing established networks, assessing their performance, and resetting their design to boost performance. With each chapter building on material in previous chapters, the book is designed to be read from front to back. But we've organized the table of contents so that you can find the particular topics that are on your need-to-know-now list.

Connecting to Change the World moves far beyond our pitch, made a decade ago, for using networks to achieve social change. It is about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes—the deep practice—needed for successful generative network building. Perhaps the fact that there actually *is* a practice, not just concepts and aspirations, will help inspire some readers to take a network path. For readers already on the path, who wonder what to do next and how well they're doing, we offer hard-earned, practical know-how from real-world network building—and our best wishes for your success.

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By Peter Plastrik, Madeleine Taylor, and John Cleveland

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Advance Praise:

“The hard truth is, every organization is facing complex social problems that they can’t solve on their own. The good news is, every organization can build networks that will help them create solutions together. *Connecting to Change the World* is the must-read manual that will teach you how to put this strategy to work if you really want to make a difference.”

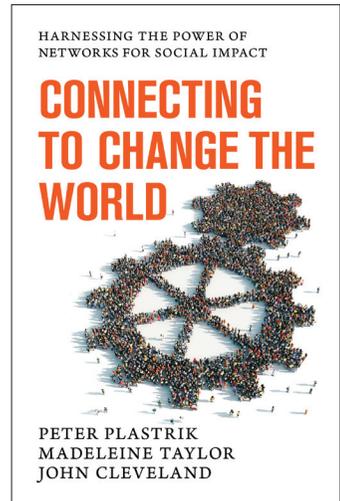
—Alan Webber, cofounder, *Fast Company* and author of *Life Reimagined* and *Rules of Thumb*

“We are living in a world where social change is about working networks, not about building organizations, especially if you need to work with Millennials. This book is a must read for anyone working in the nonprofit sector and wants to achieve more impact. The authors have done an amazing job overviewing the trends and offering valuable practical insights about how to build networks for social change—from design and connection to results.”

—Beth Kanter, coauthor, *The Networked Nonprofit* and *Measuring the Networked Nonprofit*

Peter Plastrik is cofounder and Vice-President, Innovation Network for Communities (INC), a nonprofit national network of community system innovators. **Madeleine Taylor, Ph.D.**, has conducted policy and evaluation research for the public and nonprofit sectors since 1987. **John Cleveland** is President and a founder of the Innovation Network for Communities (INC).

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