

# Reimagining Systems Change



# Reimagining Systems Change:

*A Bottom-Up Approach*

By

Rana Dajani and Tate Gallagher

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## PREFACE

Addressing societal issues has moved past the point of “fixing” the system that is in place. In many instances, the system in place cannot be “fixed” because it is not truly “broken”—it’s acting according to its design. Systems change is the new approach today which aims to address the root causes of the world’s most imminent problems. A lot of the discussion around systems change, however, is often theoretical and quite abstract. Numerous books, articles, and webinars tend to approach the subject in a very academic way—focusing on the theory of systems change, how to measure it, what it means, and why it is important. What this fails to address though is what systems change looks like in practice. Who are the changemakers working on creating sustainable change on the ground and what does it really take?

As a proximate leader on the ground for twenty years—developing programs and empowering and teaching numerous individuals to construct meaningful systems change—I would rather talk about systems change from a totally different perspective. I acknowledge systems change as the way forward, however our approach must be aligned with desired outcomes. This means changing terminology and definitions, how impact is measured, and how goals are prioritized.

This volume is about solving global social challenges from the bottom up rather than from the top down. We tell the story of We Love Reading, a program that solves a global social challenge from the bottom up using a systems change approach. In the process of telling the story of We Love Reading there are comparisons and lessons in the five major areas of systems change that include: leadership, the people, funding, measurement, and growth. The work shares my journey of shifting away from the route of a standard social entrepreneur and adopting a systems change approach. How I changed and evolved, and what I discovered along the way. Drawing from my journey, I hope to provide these practical lessons in systems change as guidance for anyone around the world embarking on their journey to create a better world for their community and humanity.

This work is divided into two books. Book One describes a bottom up approach to creating mission driven organizations. Book Two, completed

over the course of 2018-2019, serves as a testimonial for this approach to creating and operating a mission driven organization by telling the story of We Love Reading. Throughout the book there are numerous references to my (Rana's) personal experience in starting We Love Reading as a grassroots initiative, studying and teaching biology, and conducting research. For the sake of clarity, any references in the first person will reflect those experiences. Any references to "we" outside of the context of We Love Reading tend to reflect the conversations and research conducted between co-authors.

We hope that you will enjoy, learn, and grow as you turn the pages. Most importantly, we hope this book will inspire and give you the courage to be a changemaker to contribute to a better world for future generations.



# **BOOK I**

## **A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO CREATING MISSION DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONS**

**BY:  
PROFESSOR RANA DAJANI  
& TATE GALLAGHER**

## CO-AUTHOR'S NOTE

On a warm October afternoon in Richmond, VA in 2020, a friend and I visited the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to see Kehinde Wiley's recently installed statue *Rumors of War* and begin preparing for our upcoming midterms. He was working on what appeared to be a children's book. This piqued my curiosity as we were both in our final year of college at the University of Richmond and he was not an education major, so I asked him what the project was for.

"I'm taking an elective called Reimagining Success," he said. "You should see if it works with your schedule next semester, I think you'd really enjoy it."

He continued to tell me about the professor, Dr. Rana Dajani, a visiting lecturer in the Jepson School Leadership Studies, who had a unique approach to teaching. He connected Rana and I a couple weeks later over email, and in our first in person meeting she explained her teaching style and purpose to me. Her focus is on fostering curiosity, seeking answers instead of simply memorizing facts and figures, and peer-to-peer learning using students' unique experiences and perspectives. We continued to discuss some of the classes I was currently taking in the Nonprofit Studies program and she explained how she had started a nonprofit organization called We Love Reading.

I left that meeting knowing that I had so much more to learn from her. Although I wasn't able to take her class, we crafted an independent study aimed at investigating the similarities and differences between how textbooks teach nonprofit management and what she had learned about leading an organization from experience. This book is the result of our research and conversations from that semester.

—Tate Gallagher

# INTRODUCTION

“I trust every woman, man, and child to discover their potential and change the world for future generations and humanity.”

—Rana Dajani, Founder of We Love Reading

I remember going to renew my driver's license a few years ago in Amman, Jordan. There was a survey on the board asking passersby to arrange a series of statements about water, the environment, education, and health according to importance. I arranged the statements, thinking deeply about the impacts each had on the world. Only later did I realize that this was part of the global effort to enlist everyone around the world in defining and prioritizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. The reason the world made this effort was to ensure basic human rights for everyone on the planet.

Today the world has been overcome by a pandemic, the undeniable realities of climate change, and wars which are escalating everywhere with increasingly fascist and totalitarian governments. As a biologist who studies evolution on a grand scale, I should not be devastated. This is the natural course in the history of any group of organisms. The existence of humans in the universe is a mere millisecond in the history of the universe. So what is the problem? I am a human being and human beings have a conscience, which makes us aware of our surroundings in addition to our desire to survive. We feel responsibility and emotions and we have an opportunity to make a difference as individuals. So what can we do?

Too often, governments and organizations have failed to solve social challenges. Therefore, it is up to us as individuals to take action. We cannot, however, overlook the increased reach and impact an organization can have. The question is: how does one go from an idea to an organization that creates social impact most effectively? There are many departments, programs, research projects, and courses that focus on this question. The majority of

these efforts, however, are driven by the Global North and by the frameworks and processes of capitalism. The purpose of this book is to compare the reality on the ground with these existing frameworks. To draw a path for doers to follow or use as a map.

As a scientist, I have learned that the best lessons often lie in observing nature. For this reason, I have adopted this approach of observing and experimenting with our reality and have applied it to systems change and social impact work. I know that the path will evolve and change, but that is part of the learning process. What makes this journey unique is that it begins by exploring the history and evolution of social impact and connects it along the way with the principles of biology.

If we were to follow the theory and conventions that govern social entrepreneurship and the nonprofit sector today, would we create a successful, sustainable organization? This was a primary guiding question we asked before exploring the topics in this book. While we may not find an answer for every question generated or explored throughout the book, we believe that the conversations started because of this book will create lasting value in the social impact sector. We investigate language, human biology, philosophy, and more to identify what shapes the decisions made when trying to solve social issues now, and how we can approach these problems more effectively.

By combining our experiences—from starting a successful nonprofit that operates with an innovative model, and learning the theories of nonprofits through the Nonprofit Studies graduate program at the University of Richmond—we have been able to identify a number of areas where the theoretical principles might not be the most effective method to use in practice. Social impact work is incredibly unique, which is why we believe that it needs a framework that was designed specifically for it, not adapted from the business or government worlds. Naturally, there are similarities, but in order to create sustainable systems change, we must adapt the way we approach problem solving.

We decided to challenge each major aspect of starting or operating a nonprofit by keying in on the origins of each facet. By exploring the origins of terminology and philosophies, we believe we have begun to uncover some design flaws in the nonprofit sector. Our approach is rooted in questioning the systems in place, not necessarily providing all of the answers. We accept that we do not have the answer to every question, nor do we believe that anyone can have all of the answers. Instead, we have focused on making sure the right questions are being asked and the right perspectives are being listened to.

Our research and experience have helped develop a framework that we believe serves as a lens through which we can look at social impact work differently. For this kind of work, we believe that the key to success and sustainability lies within the mentality with which one approaches these issues.

Book one contains ten chapters, beginning with this one as an introduction setting the tone of why this book is timely. The following chapter gives a brief outline of We Love Reading (WLR), an award winning social entity that will be used throughout the book as a beacon to learn from.

Chapter Two describes how we can learn from nature to better inform our work within human societies. As a molecular biologist I could not resist sharing reflections from nature that I have encountered that offer insights into carrying out systems change more productively. In both biology and social impact work, we engage with living systems. Humans are not machines, so the same terms and definitions cannot be applied. For example, the term “scaling” is mechanical, not biological. Biologists choose the term “growth,” as in when experimenting with how seeds grow differently in different soil types. One does not “scale” a plant.

Chapter Three addresses some of the requirements to adopt a bottom up approach to systems change by modifying terminology, definitions, frameworks, and more. In this chapter we investigate what the term “nonprofit” means etymologically and recommend adopting the label of “Social Impact Organization (SIO)” instead. Throughout the book we will reference many of the names used for organizations in this sector including:

nonprofit, non-governmental organization (NGO), and international non-governmental organization (INGO). Then we will introduce why we believe the term social impact organization encompasses the work of these organizations more effectively. We also introduce a new framework we have called the Social Impact Evolution. It is an approach to systems change that centers around problem solving and explains the relationship between in-group and out-group social entrepreneurs and the impacts that each group has on the evolution of a social impact organization throughout its life cycle.

Many of these topics revolve around effective leadership, which is addressed in Chapter Four. This chapter explains how the leadership styles at WLR evolved over the years in relation to the trajectory of the program. It also includes parallels with existing leadership models and introduces new frameworks which enable innovative approaches to leadership, including a “leaderless” organization.

Chapter Five challenges the use of the word “beneficiary” as a description for the group of people that an organization is working to help. Instead of victimizing this group, our framework seeks to empower the disenfranchised to help them solve their own problems.

Chapter Six identifies and explains why we believe the term “nonprofit” is a misnomer before discussing the different roles that funding can and should play in the social impact sector. We do not attempt to undermine the value that funders add to the system, but we challenge the decision-making power they often command because of their financial contributions.

Chapter Seven examines the idea that how individuals choose to measure success is a key contributor to how decisions are made in social impact organizations. Money is often used as a unit of measurement because it is easier to quantify than impact, but this type of measurement can create misaligned incentives and shift the focus of an organization away from its mission. If instead society places additional value on other forms of measurement, like stories for example, it will be easier for organizations to make decisions in the best interest of their mission.

Chapter Eight identifies some of the most sustainable ways an organization can scale its operations. In addition, this chapter also challenges the capitalist notion of “growth for growth’s sake” and shifts the

focus of growth towards reaching the in-group social entrepreneurs in different communities that can most effectively implement programs.

Finally, the last chapter summarizes the lessons from the book as well as comments on how the framework we designed can be applied to many aspects of life. Because being able to listen to and embrace other perspectives is a major focus of the framework, there are many applications for it. Some examples of this will be supplied, but we also challenge the reader to identify opportunities to use this way of thinking in their own lives.

The book leads us on a journey comparing theory with reality in terms of leadership, the people served, funding, measurement, and growth. We challenge the existing frameworks and propose new paradigm shifts. Our work is all about systems change. We use We Love Reading as an example of a grassroots social impact initiative and attempt to share as many voices coming from different cultures, genders, ethnicities, and ages as possible. We want our voices to be included in and enrich the global conversation, but more importantly, we strive to provide actionable steps toward creating sustainable social impact organizations.

Our narrative serves as a handbook or guide that complements new emerging ideas and efforts—such as *The Systems Work of Social Change* by Rayner and Bonnici and Catalyst 2030 network—with simple straightforward steps.<sup>1</sup>

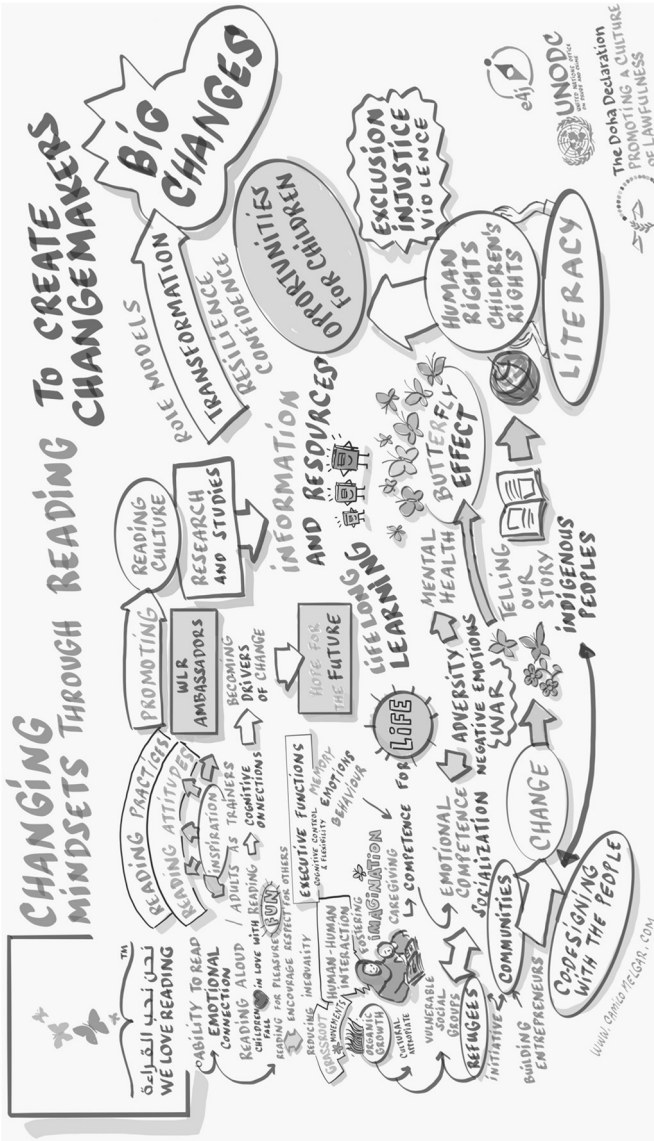
We hope that this book serves as a guide for all decisions you may be a part of making to help solve social problems around the world. Prioritizing people and in-group social entrepreneurs in every organization is not going to happen overnight, but it is our hope that introducing these concepts will influence the decision-makers of the future. Whether you are the CEO of a large, international organization, you have an idea for a solution to a problem in your community, or you are a student studying SIOs, you can apply these problem-solving techniques to have a profound positive impact. Throughout the book we include boxes to highlight key takeaways or

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<sup>1</sup> Rayner, Cynthia. (2021) 2021. *The Systems Work of Social Change*. Edited by François Bonnici. First. Oxford University Press.

lessons in an effort to make these important points easier to remember and reference. Our goal is to introduce this way of thinking into the decision-making process so that more successful, sustainable solutions are presented every step of the way.





## THE WE LOVE READING STORY

“Read”

—Quran 96:1

Given the current scope, size, and impact of We Love Reading (WLR), it may be surprising to learn that the organization began as a small, personal project of mine. My love of reading stemmed from early childhood, when I would get lost in stories for hours and hours. As the years carried on, I never lost sight of the important role reading played in my development, and when I became a mother, I passed on this love of reading to my children. In 2006, after returning to Jordan from a Fulbright Fellowship in the U.S., I was struck by the lack of public libraries and the overall culture of reading in my home country. Then, one Saturday morning in February 2006, I decided to bring a bag of children’s books across the road to my local mosque in Amman. I donned a traditional folklore dress and a silly hat, and spent an hour reading stories to the two dozen children gathered around.

During Friday prayers the following week, the imam advertised the storytime to the congregation. This time, fifty children showed up. With a small grant from the mosque, and some personal savings, I purchased a collection of books for my first library. I performed the stories in costume and with puppets, and read three books before offering to lend each child a book to take home. Some of these children had never had a children’s book in their home. These efforts were done in consultation with my own family; my husband and children.

From this inspiring experience—and the “sparkle” in the children’s eyes as I read to them—I grew determined to share this powerful practice more widely. One by one, I trained other women to do the same, and soon formed

the social impact organization (SIO) named *Taghyeer*, that brought We Love Reading to life. “*Taghyeer*” means “change” in Arabic.

WLR trains women, men, and youths to read books from their local culture aloud in their native language to children in the neighborhood on a regular basis. The training encompasses all stages of starting a reading circle including: how to choose an appropriate children’s book (and how to write one if the relevant literature does not exist), the art of reading aloud, and how to foster a love of reading within a child. Throughout every stage, the training emphasizes why *reading for fun* is important for reaping the benefits of reading.

After completing the training session, the trainee becomes a WLR Ambassador and starts a reading circle, or many circles, in their neighborhood. The reading circles are a living library because after the read-aloud the Ambassador exchanges books with the children each session for them to read at home.

Ambassadors have full autonomy to make decisions on how best to run their reading circle. They choose where and when to host their reading circles based on what works best for their community. It could be anywhere: in a mosque, a church, a community center, a school, or even under a tree. We trust them fully to know what will work best. The Ambassadors are connected with each other through an online community where they can share successes and challenges and support each other, but *Taghyeer* and the We Love Reading program do not influence or control their decisions. This freedom, we have found, empowers our Ambassadors, nourishing their inner social entrepreneur to tackle other challenges in their community as well.

My team and I have steadily trained reading volunteers ever since we began. Over 18 years, this simple yet incredibly potent community-based intervention has taken off beyond our wildest dreams. We have nurtured the organization with great attention to maintaining quality during exponential growth, and have shepherded this growth process sustainably, with a solid foundation in research and evidence-based practices. The result: a worldwide changemaking movement, bringing the pleasure of reading to

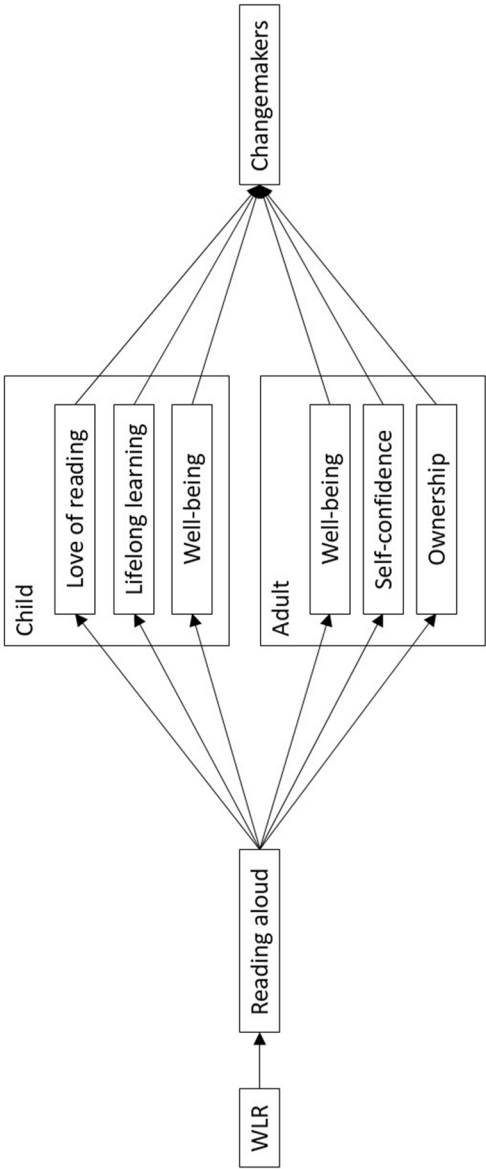
children everywhere, empowering women and girls, and broadening the horizons of neighborhoods and communities.

Even as the WLR movement continues to expand globally, the core strategy has remained unchanged. WLR focuses on empowering in-group social entrepreneurs who want to make a difference in their communities by instilling a love of reading in children. Despite the size of our impact, WLR has always held true to the Social Impact Evolution framework. In each community that a new reading circle starts, our Ambassadors work from the inside out and bottom up, adapting to meet the needs of the community. We have found this method to be the most successful in creating systems change, instead of assuming that the exact same implementation model will work everywhere.

At my core, I am a problem solver, identifying my personal needs and creating solutions. Only later did I step into the role of a social entrepreneur when I realized that other communities were experiencing a similar problem, and—over three years of trial and error—developed a practical and sustainable solution. Eventually I applied for funding and mentoring from a philanthropist on how to establish an organization.

Setting up an SIO requires many technical steps including: legal registration, crafting a mission and vision, writing business and strategic plans, creating and operating programs, marketing, and more. Each step along the way must be aligned with a clear goal in order to chart a path of progress. A path which of course will change and be updated continuously. Throughout all of these steps, it is critical to listen to the voices from within a community to ensure that the most effective solutions are being identified. In the next few chapters we will dive into these topics further and provide examples of how SIOs can navigate each step most successfully.

Theory of Change for We Love Reading



## SYSTEMS CHANGE AND NATURE

"Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better"  
—Albert Einstein

I am a biologist at heart. I have been fascinated with nature ever since I was a child. I breathe, eat, and sleep, nature. Growing up, I would find any excuse I could to learn more about it, including dragging all seven of my sisters up onto the roof of our family home to watch Haley's Comet pass by. I wanted to be a pioneer of the world and universe. But since I could not, I became a pioneer at the level of the cell, proteins, and genes. I can't help but see reflections of nature in everything around me. Often I hear conversations from individuals who discuss humanity and society as if these entities are separate from nature. Perhaps modernity and technology has created new systems that on the surface look different from anything we readily see in nature, but as we investigate a little deeper, the same laws and principles that govern nature still apply. After all, technological innovations were designed and programmed by humans, meaning these programs can mirror human biases formed over generations of society.

My observations of nature fill me with awe and wonder. It's like a game. Marveling at nature and trying to better understand our relationship with it has always been my passion. Through this journey I have discovered the harmony that exists between human beings and nature when I focus on us as part of the same system. When a particular phenomenon of human interaction catches my attention I can typically immediately see its corollary in nature. That is why throughout the book you will see periodic allusions to examples from nature.

This chapter frames systems change within nature for two reasons. The first is to prove that I am not crazy! The ideas and alternative solutions presented in this book should not simply be presumed as impossible—the

processes already exist and follow very similar paths to what we observe in nature. And second, the solutions suggested are rooted in evolutionary biology and are therefore meaningful at micro and macro levels (both in individual communities and society as a whole). This approach both benefits our societal relationships, and in return teaches us more about how nature works.

As an evolutionary biologist I have the conviction that every human being has evolved to have traits that prolong our survival as a species. One of these traits is the innate capacity to be a changemaker. What I mean by a changemaker is someone who sees themselves as a problem solver. A person who identifies a problem in their local community, comes up with a solution through trial and error, and solves the problem because they want themselves and those around them to survive.

Every person is unique by virtue of the DNA that they inherit, meaning there is no human who is identical to any other that has ever existed, exists today, or will ever exist in the future. Epigenetics reveals that even identical twins exhibit slight variations due to differences in their environmental exposures, which influence changes in gene expression. This diversity is essential for our survival as a species. We are also inherently social creatures that can only survive in a society. Thus, we have evolved with a set of traits that foster and nurture social interactions. Through trial and error, these community-centric traits have been selected for.

From a systems change perspective, any system that does not favor and support these community focused social interactions is bound to fail, even if it may seem to survive in the short-term. Naturally, there will be trade-offs along the way, but on an evolutionary scale of time that is allowed. Systems change solutions that do not take these evolutionary factors into consideration, and do not properly understand the roles within a particular community, cannot be sustainable in the long-run.

In the same context, We Love Reading acknowledges the uniqueness in each community reading circle by having the Ambassadors decide where, when, and how to read to the children. Also by reading (and sometimes writing!) stories in the native language of the community. WLR celebrates this diversity while having a universal set of values that connects all

Ambassadors: love of children, trust, and integrity. The program has been able to create a delicate balance between unity and diversity, reflecting nature's balance, and as a result has been successful in spreading across the world. In a way, it's like how a virus spreads beyond humanity's artificial borders, adapting and changing along the way. This begs the question: what lessons can we learn from virology and apply to the growth of programs?

Within the philosophy of We Love Reading everyone is a changemaker. We do not believe we need to create changemakers, but simply nurture them through human to human interaction that boosts confidence and ownership. We empower our Ambassadors so that they too perceive themselves as capable of taking responsibility for creating change in their communities.

This is not how the WLR program started, however. It took several iterations and observations of our reading circles in practice before we realized that as an Ambassador reads aloud to children and interacts with her community, her confidence is boosted and her feeling of responsibility and agency is increased. We have often observed that this leads to her adopting a changemakers mindset, and results in her identifying additional problems to solve.

These discoveries and changes were reflected in the literal evolution of our organization's mission. At the beginning, our mission was "Fostering a love of reading among children." But once we realized that WLR was not only impacting children, but also the adults who were reading aloud to the children, we changed our mission to "Changing mindsets through reading to create changemakers." "Changemakers" here refers to both the children and the Ambassadors reading aloud to them.

While this adaptation was progress, we soon realized that even this statement did not perfectly encapsulate what was happening in our reading circles. Upon further reflection we asked ourselves "who are we to assume we are *creating* a changemaker?" This unlocked our true philosophy and we adapted the mission once again, changing the word "create" to "nurture." Humans are born changemakers and they simply need to spark their innate capacity to bring about change. Therefore our mission's latest iteration is "Changing mindsets through reading to nurture change makers". Throughout the growth of our organization we have remained open to



change because we are continuously learning. Who knows how our mission will change again? We allow the natural evolution of our organization to guide us on what steps we should take next.

WLR began as simply one person behaving as a changemaker—developing a solution through trial and error and inviting others to do the same, in their own way and at their own pace. Later, I realized people call this process human centered design. I call it evolution. When it is forced in a workshop or boot camp it is like artificial evolution, but when it is left alone to grow organically it is a more natural evolution. The longer timeline of natural evolution mitigates unintended consequences. Left at its own pace, evolution creates wonderful adaptations that result in a successful system. Each adaptation has a purpose and has had the opportunity to learn from all of the prior adaptations a system has experienced.

Just as adaptations throughout evolution are interdependent, so too are the numerous entities that form society. The presence of these complex relationships all inform the evolutionary process as societies change and develop. WLR is a mini example of that. As it evolved we discovered the other interdependent facets that WLR unknowingly addressed and assets it created. By virtue of being left alone to mature, we found that our reading circles not only inspired a love of reading in children but also led to reports of improved reading skills and mental health. In our Ambassadors, it fostered leadership in the community and the belief that they could inspire other change movements as well. And as WLR evolved, it challenged the existing social entrepreneurship frameworks of measurement, scaling, and more, while providing solutions along the way.

The underlying principles of this philosophy and approach to an organization's evolution also challenges the concept of scaling as it is currently implemented. Scaling today tends to focus on efficiency and repeatability. In other words, how one program can be imprinted on many different communities. This concept neglects the autonomy and diversity of the human being, as well as the surrounding environment a human interacts with throughout her lifetime. Thus one cannot truly scale a program sustainably. However, It is far more sustainable to scale a mindset. This was abruptly brought to my attention when members of the organization and my

advisors repeatedly raised the question of scaling. The idea of scaling traditionally seemed alien and did not quite fit with what we were trying to accomplish with WLR. In fact, each conversation I had about scaling brought with it a creeping sense of unease. I certainly wanted to spread our work to more communities, but I dreaded the possibility of the WLR program creating “colonies” around the world. I kept reminding myself that our focus would remain on helping people discover their inner changemaker, and then we would leave them alone to make their own decisions about implementing the WLR program. Therefore each program created worldwide would in essence be its own entity and not a “colony” of the original. But, this approach did not fit the framework of scaling as it is defined today.

Instead of aiming to establish an entity in every country or region, WLR takes a systems change approach, spreading mindsets to create a movement. This approach attempts to reach everyone in a community, not only those specifically involved in a program. Some social impact organizations follow a similar model, borrowing a “franchising framework” from the for-profit sector wherein a centralized group of decision-makers implement nearly identical programs in different locations. Where WLR differs is our focus on the individuality of each program. We refer to each Ambassador-led reading circle as its own unique entity.

Patience is key when utilizing this method because it follows the slower pace of nature. We are not concerned with the pace of our adoption rate. In marketing, instead of trying to draw attention to ourselves, WLR is relatively low profile. As we will discuss more in a chapter dedicated to growth and scaling, WLR follows a growth trajectory focused on the long-term solution of changing a system, not merely expanding the reach of the organization. As an entity we seek to create new systems where our work is no longer needed.

...

I liken the WLR Ambassadors' innate capacity to be changemakers to potential energy that is stored within them, waiting to be unleashed. Like a compressed spring or water held at the top of a mountain, prepared to find a

way to cascade down the mountainside. In the language of thermodynamics, the difference in energy is negative, meaning naturally the energy should be released. The water should flow, but it doesn't. Why not? Well in nature it is not enough to merely have a negative delta energy. The system also needs activation energy to create a reaction. In biology this is facilitated by enzymes or catalysts that reduce the activation energy required, which increases the probability and rate of reaction.<sup>2</sup> For example, in thermodynamic terms, sugar should burst into flame because of its negative delta energy, but it never does because the activation energy required to create such a reaction is too high. I see social entrepreneurship programs as those which provide the activation energy—that give the spark that kindles the fire to unleash the changemaking potential in each human. That is what WLR does. WLR does not claim to create this human potential, but through empowerment of our Ambassadors it provides the activation energy to spark our changemakers.

As organizations grow and prosper, it is common to measure various metrics in an effort to quantify impact and success. This was another aspect of traditional organizational management which I felt strongly was an area for WLR to reimagine. Each human, each changemaker, embarks on a journey that is unique to the individual. Therefore, assuming that the ending place, or marker that most organizations urge their programs to reach, should be the same is inherently flawed. The pace and path each program follows will vary and there is no way to measure them all accurately with a single tool. This begs us to imagine a whole new way of measuring impact. What elements should we be observing to measure whether our work is creating sustainable change?

Borrowing yet again from nature's examples we see how measurement in the field of quantum mechanics impacts a system. The principles of quantum mechanics state that matter and or energy can be measured as a static particle or a dynamic wave. As soon as we capture it to measure it, though, the particle loses certain qualities and we cannot measure it in its

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper, Geoffrey M. 2000. "The Central Role of Enzymes as Biological Catalysts." *The Cell: A Molecular Approach. 2nd Edition* 2 (2).  
[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK9921/#:~:text=Enzymes%20\(and%20other%20catalysts\)%20act.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK9921/#:~:text=Enzymes%20(and%20other%20catalysts)%20act.)

entirety. This is exactly what happens within systems when we unnaturally attempt to measure impact; we take a person or event and fix them in time to measure. Immediately we lose much of the context, such as what a particular action means in relation to an entire system. Reducing a program to a particular set of figures can create gaps that may actually hold the most valuable information. At WLR we choose to target our measurement efforts at entire systems. We use our resources to research and investigate the inner workings of a particular program to learn and share insights from its successes instead of asking every program to conform to uniform metrics. Once again, this promotes creativity and autonomy for our Ambassadors, allowing them to implement changes as they see fit without worrying about reaching certain measurement targets.

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There are numerous lessons to learn from nature about creating and operating a social impact organization. Here are a few that have helped WLR prosper.

The WLR training is very simple but it tackles a complex challenge. In nature, apparent complex phenomena are usually explained by simple laws. So even if we see a complex problem, we must seek simple solutions. This is systems change at its best.

Simple solutions also allow for easier adoption. Similar ideas appear everywhere. Creating a simple solution allows different communities or social entrepreneurs with similar ideas to implement solutions faster and more seamlessly. In order to change systems on a broad scale, these qualities are paramount.

### **Key Takeaway: Maintain Simplicity**

Use the power of simplicity to tackle complex problems.

WLR is an organic program that evolved from grassroots, that is why it does not subscribe to existing systems and paradigms. Instead we play the role of a disrupter. Our work challenges existing frameworks and theories if we find they do not adequately address the root causes of social issues. Our bottom up approach is based on the concept of empowering autonomy in social entrepreneurs around the world. We are very thoughtful about maintaining this approach as a way to avoid hegemony over any of our global programs.

In this way we try to mimic and embrace one of nature's most consequential lessons: evolution. We allow all of our Ambassadors complete control of their programs so that they can iterate freely and react to any situations that may arise. Remaining agile is critical to sustainability because programs must be able to change as any problems they are trying to solve change. Programs and systems that are unable to evolve are unable to survive.

### **Key Takeaway: Be Prepared to Change**

The ability to evolve is key to the success of an organization or system.

There is a popular phrase regarding evolution that states “only the strong survive.” I like to challenge that sentiment by saying “only the social survive.” Social interaction has been essential to our survival and development as a species. Human interaction is an element of the WLR program that we take great pride in. In our reading circles our Ambassadors read from physical copies of books and engage with the children through eye contact and acting out parts of the story. We focus on the shared human experience that is essential for mental and emotional health.

Building these healthy social relationships is accomplished with trust. If we did not build our programs on trust, or lost it at any point, we would be bound to fail. Unfortunately, there are many examples from around the world of programs that do not establish trust between the organization and the community. As a result, the community members do not have as much

input into the formation of the programs aimed at helping them. It is as if these organizations do not trust the community members to know what they need.

### **Key Takeaway: Form Trust**

Trust forms the backbone of the human species and should be a foundational element in all social programming.

Another important lesson from nature is that entities collaborate and complement one another rather than compete. The concept of competition is very capitalistic and works against nature because it favors individualism. We as humans have survived because we need each other. We are social creatures. Any other approach will not be successful for the whole community.

I was in a conference on early childhood education and one participant was showing how he measured competitiveness in children as an indicator of success and achievement. I challenged him by asking, “is that what we want our children to aspire towards?” Are we not setting them up for a life that is not in harmony with the rest of population and nature for that matter? Unconsciously, we have come to think that many of the capitalist notions of success are human values, when they are not and are in essence detrimental to our survival as a species. As a famous African proverb states: If you want to go fast go alone. If you want to go far go together.

The WLR approach was founded on these principles as a way to create lasting, sustainable change that can benefit any community worldwide. We are trying to create a movement which is a force to change education around the world, led by the local proximate leaders of a given community.

To accomplish this we have found an approach that mimics the proven systems observed in nature. These methods avoid the mechanical approach that many human-implemented systems rely upon for efficiency and repeatability that often bring with them significant unintended consequences.