



# **The Non-Politicians: The Civil Society Leadership We Need**

I am not waiting. Neither are my friends and colleagues. Yes, get out there and vote. Yes, the vote matters BIG TIME. But I wanted to write this piece, in October 2020, *before* the election. Why? Because no matter who wins, it's Game Time for the social sector. No matter who wins, the scale and scope of the challenges we face - COVID19, racial injustice and unrest, climate change - are calling for new approaches to leadership and for new leaders from all walks.

In recent times, social sector leaders have really stepped up, in myriad ways, to address gaps in our social fabric. And I'm not talking about charitable organizations perhaps hosting a luncheon and collecting donations. That's an image of the past. Today, more than ever, there is an energetic social sector - nonprofits, NGOs, their supporters - working with urgency and in real proximity to the problems we are trying to solve. These players are bold and innovating in audacious ways. This is a social sector that is leading, not waiting to be led. And I say Bravo. We want more.

While working on a new book about leadership in the social sector, I've had the opportunity to speak to a wide range of incredible individuals leading organizations and movements that are changing the world for the better. And let me be clear, not all leaders have an official title or run a formal organization.

Some of the most inspiring and courageous leaders today come directly from the communities most impacted by the many disparities in our world. Consider Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors with Black Lives Matter. Consider Greta Thunberg. These are “org-less leaders” inspiring decentralized political and social movements advocating for large-scale change.

Whether you’re running a non-profit organization, pushing for better public policy or part of a community collaborative, these times call for leaders with deep integrity, the imagination to think big, and the resilience to take on what might at first seem like intractable challenges.

Across the interviews I’ve conducted over the past year, several concepts keep rising to the top. I see these themes as fundamental qualities we need in the leaders of today, as well as action steps in a process for bringing about the changes our society needs.

- **Find your voice:** The leaders I’m talking to consistently demonstrate courage and authenticity. We need more leaders who are grounded in their values and leave no doubt as to what they stand for, no matter how difficult the situation or unpopular the stance. The problems we face are huge, so don’t dance around the issues. Have a point of view and bring it forward. We don’t have time to be passive and indirect. Speaking your truth is not optional in today’s world. And it’s not about how loud you say it, *it’s that you say it*. You’re a leader the moment you open your mouth and share your perspective.
- **Reimagine your team:** Today’s social sector organizations are solving complex problems. No individual leader can do this on their own. We need leaders with the humility to go beyond their own network, the willingness to seek out a team with complementary strengths, the ability to attract individuals with diverse life experiences. Yes, it’s about race. Yes, it’s about gender. It’s also about education, income, and culture. We have plenty of research proving that diverse teams are more innovative

and effective. This is a no-brainer. And yet, I can't tell you how many rooms I walk into that are homogenous. It's clear to me that there's no chance of getting to the real root of the problem and coming up with a solution until we work on how we define and create our teams at every level.

- **Go cross-sector:** Just as leaders need to reimagine their teams, organizations need to get beyond sector silos. Our challenges today are multi-faceted and can't be addressed by any one sector alone. While American civil society has become increasingly divided, the challenges we face are at a scale and level of complexity that demands new ways of working together in partnership, bringing the different resources and strengths of the private, public, and social sectors together. This ain't easy, but I'm seeing it more and more often. And here it is worth noting that it is often the social sector leader who sets the table, who invites in stakeholders from other sectors and broadens the tent.

Effective leaders are using the power of their voice, bringing together diverse teams, and forming powerful cross-sector coalitions. Fundamentally, *they are stepping into the discomfort of working with people and organizations that fall outside of their typical "lane" because they are so passionate about changing the world for the better.* On the surface this may sound obvious or straightforward, yet it's not always easy to do in practice and can take time.

On my mind as I write this piece is Rosanne Haggerty of Community Solutions and Built for Zero. In the early 90s, Rosanne went to work on homelessness in New York City's Times Square. Blink forward: today the organization she leads is helping end homelessness in over 80 communities across the nation. Along the way Rosanne has reset expectations about what is possible and contributed mightily to a paradigm shift, from caring for the homeless to ending homelessness.

If you listen to Rosanne, it's not so much that she figured out a new program. It's

that she listened, learned, iterated ... and kept going. She considers Sarah, an 80-year old chronically homeless woman who was “service-resistant” when it came to food and blankets, but who embraced a home, be one of her important teachers. Sarah is one of many who helped Rosanne reframe the underlying question, to find and strengthen her voice for the housing first movement.

Rosanne also built allies, something she has called “reaching outside the circle of usual suspects”. She helped fostered a *process* for local community-building around the concept that homelessness can be measured and driven to functional zero. By building coalitions of disparate groups that have a stake in the ending homelessness (city officials, government agencies, the Veterans Administration, developers, non-profits), and by harnessing the creativity that comes from urgent and shared goals, Rosanne has created a methodology for community alignment. And she will tell you that it takes a community to solve homelessness. She admits collaboration can be uncomfortable at times as groups learn to share information, hold each other accountable, and resist taking credit. But her process has shown that collaboration makes radical change possible. Since 2015, there are 125,000 chronically homeless individuals and counting who have been housed, who are living this change.

We need more leaders like Rosanne. Leaders who are finding their voice, stepping up to the plate, collaborating in new ways, and having outsized impact. The non-politicians — community members, social sector, corporate, civic leaders — are the real innovators.

So is this article a call to action? Heck yes. Jump into the work and/or challenge yourself to work differently...and hang in there. You might be surprised. Many of the biggest innovations that will shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century will originate in the social sector. And while the social sector is traditionally about 2% of the economy, I know that we are a much, much bigger part of the answer.