

Board of Directors

George R. Roberts
Chair

Stuart Davidson
Secretary/Treasurer

Lande Ajose

Harris Barton

Elizabeth Y.A. Ferguson

Julia I. Lopez

Richard M. Rosenberg

Adam Smith

Notes for SOCAP 2009 Plenary

September 1, 2009 (Carla Javits, President, REDF)

With Jeff Bradach, Sonal Shah, Vanessa Kirsh, Andrew Wolk

- 1) What is it about what is happening now in DC that you think might *really* have legs? When we look back 10 years from now, what might we say *really* changed by virtue of what is happening now?
 - As I understand it:
 - **PURPOSE** of office: Ramp up impact and effectiveness of solutions to social issues
 - **PRIMARY METHOD**: Catalyzing partnerships between government, nonprofits, philanthropy and business
 - **At simplest level: achievement will be more impact and effectiveness of solutions; more partnerships that create the solutions.**
 - What would that really mean? My lens as an example – poverty – could be environment or other arenas but I'll use that as my frame.
 - What's the problem? Despite a plethora of government initiatives to address poverty, the overall poverty rate has remained startlingly static – reliably hovering around 11-13% of the population since the late 1960's. We do seem to be able to make progress – the poverty rate declined dramatically and steadily from 22% in the late 1950's, to 12% or so in the late 1960's as our post-war economy expanded – but once it hit around 12% in the late 1960's, it more or less stayed there.

10 years from now: Success – the percentage living in poverty is dropping each year. Millions of Americans who are not now working, or who are stuck in a revolving door of low wage, low benefit work are routinely getting jobs and advancing.

In 10 years, we have accomplished something if innovation is defined not so much in terms of new ideas and original programs, but more around the less glamorous systemic changes in policies, incentives, and practice that connect pieces of a solution to one another; and innovation is about supporting, sustaining and replicating or scaling – to the extent it can be done – what works.

Trying to be undistracted by the beautiful new kid in town.



In political terms, the success of the administration's innovation effort can be seen in the tilling of the ground where small government conservatives and big government liberals (especially those motivated to get things done and not just make a name for themselves) can come together: sustained support for effective programs that really work.

Because often it's not as much about innovative change or even program expansion as we might think – it is about excellent implementation, connecting the dots, and consistency; engaging business, nonprofits, philanthropy, and various levels of government in the doing and in paying for what needs to be done; more willingness to pay when the work is done well.

The White House office has the bully pulpit and access to leaders – externally they can be thoughtful about learning what incentives would align best with each sector's interests, where there is common ground, and what requirements stand in the way of progress. Within government, and externally, they can creatively use persuasive carrots and sticks to help federal agencies, local governments, businesses and the social sector find new ways to make progress and coordinate their efforts.

They can keep their eye on fully engaging all sectors, knowing that neither the market, nor the social sector, nor civil society, nor government is immune to the pressure of big money, human foibles, bankrupt values, or dysfunction. And knowing that there is pressure on governments the world over to keep taxes relatively low, the NGO philanthropic sector is relatively small, and business is fundamentally driven by financial interests. We need all sectors functioning as well as possible to solve social problems.

They can continue to mobilize citizens and provide clear information so that media and voters are educated critics and advocates.

So what are markers of success? Government has defined the desired results well (moving the needle on the poverty level), put the right incentives in place to achieve those results in a range of communities around the country (in order to reach a kind of tipping point), and is measuring progress against benchmarks in partnership with philanthropy and academia—publishing the results, actively seeking to learn what works and what doesn't from on the ground initiatives, and adjusting as needed to improve results.

And it is sticking with the task because the results are good enough, and in tune with the interests of enough stakeholders, that there is momentum to continue that reaches beyond a single political party or leader.

Institutions of philanthropy and government at the local, state, and national levels have structures in place for routine communication about their related efforts in terms of “deal flow”— objectives, successes/failures, learning, and resource commitments—around the measurement of outcomes.

Business, nonprofits, and the ‘operational entities of government’ are responding to more coherent incentives aligned with their purpose.

Because this is not the case now, we are having a hard time building political will for the changes that need to be made.

The trick of success at the end of 10 years is to find the will and take the risk to define what we want to achieve, align as many incentives as possible with the goals, be the opposite of cynical about the role of all sectors in solving these problems, do the hard and painstaking work of building solid, practical working relationships among divergent groups that address the goals and their fundamental interests, mobilize them to action, and stick with it. Gladwell describes a fundamental principle in his book "Outliers": it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert in anything. Just as true in the social sector.