

THE HIGH-FLYING PHILANTHROPIST ~ By Mahesh Grossman

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Around the time Jonathan Lewis ran his international consulting firm specializing in health insurance, he came across a sad, yet interesting piece of information: One billion people, or about a sixth of the world's population, live an hour or more from any health care, where the meaning of the term "health care" could simply mean the ability to dispense aspirin.

As he attended conference after conference about improving medical options for those who already have access, the situation bothered him. "Though many have the ability to receive the finest treatment," he says, "other people could fall out of a tree with a compound fracture, and they're so far from any health care that it becomes a death sentence."

The lack of attention to this international problem offended Lewis's sense of a just and fair world, but it also ignited his interest in the broader subject of poverty.

Thus, when he sold his consultancy, instead of retiring, Lewis went right back to work. First, he became an executive volunteer for Freedom from Hunger, a non-profit working in global micro-finance. Then, he started a successful micro-finance non-profit of his own: MicroCredit Enterprises. His company specializes in helping the rural poor build small-scale, home-based businesses in order to provide food security for their families and ultimately create sustainable communities.

As he immersed himself in this work, Lewis began to see a pattern. He noticed that poverty is a multidisciplinary problem where there are a variety of issues needing to be solved practically and at the same time in order to make a difference in any one location. For example, you can't just work on hunger problems without addressing the problem of clean water. There is also a wide range of other issues requiring solutions, including schools, jobs, health care, population control, and the environment.

However, Lewis also became aware of something else: It turns out that most funding available for non-profits is for programs which affect a single issue. To become successful at acquiring grants, organizations are forced to specialize rather than take a more universal approach. And there was one additional concern: Organizations working on the same problem often competed instead of cooperating.

The solution (or at least a part of it) was simple. "I wanted to create a forum so people could work across silos," Lewis said. So Lewis started Opportunity Collaboration (<http://www.opportunitycollaboration.net>), a four-day "unconference" first held in October of 2009 to help individuals from a wide range of organizations find pragmatic ways to combine forces, share information, and operate more effectively.

He started off by stripping out everything he hated about typical business conventions. Instead of using a bunch of keynote speakers with PowerPoint presentations and panels of experts offering bite-sized pieces of information, Lewis set out to create a four day problem-solving strategic retreat where attendees themselves would lay the groundwork to actually accomplish something of substance during or shortly after their time together.

One way Lewis ensures his conference can achieve tangible results is his use of a strict selection process. First, each delegate must be a decision-maker in a senior leadership position within his or her organization. This gives Opportunity Collaboration its potential for quick action since the people attending can make things happen in their organizations. Lewis also balances the attendees by the type of organization for which they work. He brings together people from several categories, including nonprofit leaders, for-profit social entrepreneurs, grant-makers, government officials, foundation executives, and social

investors. Finally, the program is multigenerational, mixing people who have been in the field for a long time with new faces who provide fresh viewpoints. The Opportunity Collaboration offers 50 Cordes Fellowships for emerging leaders from all around the world.

With the right mix of people in a relaxed environment, where the focus is an exchange of information from the participants themselves rather than the passing of knowledge from experts on a stage, there are literally instant outcomes.

Here's just one example: A delegate from MicroEnergy Credits, a global aggregator of carbon credits for microloan borrowers, met a delegate from the Swift Foundation during the program.

The two organizations had never interacted before, but after the two spent just a few days together, the foundation decided to invest \$100,000 in the microfinance company during the conference itself.

Of course, like all conferences, many of the results, ranging from mentoring relationships to additional funding, come after the program ends. Still, the program is obviously quite effective. "We measure success by what nitty-gritty results are birthed on-site," says Lewis.

For him, the most magical moments are when organization leaders realize they can do better work by collaborating with groups they once viewed as competitors. As Lewis sees it, "In the end, when it comes to poverty, there are no competitors; we are all colleagues."



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