

Small's Big potential

Pave the way for impact by striking a balance between the small and the big

Attempting to solve large-scale social challenges can be an overwhelming task. They are the domain of messy, interdependent, complicated issues, outdated models, and often mired in the status quo. It's not unusual to face a paralysis in action or become stuck in endless debate when attempting change within this environment. Added to that is the tendency to polarize across two extremes: either assume that these massive challenges demand even bigger solutions, or avoid the complexity all together by focusing details in isolation, too small to have any impact.

The reality is, it's not either/or. Embracing the tension, and connecting small to a bigger purpose, can unlock huge potential. Increasingly we are seeing old industries, large organizations, and big systems all exploring ways to seed new solutions that challenge old norms and reconnecting with their potential to act small. Armed with new tools, suddenly both small and big take on new meaning. It's now easier to connect, collaborate, and align small actions around a bigger purpose. It's not simply about small in large volume, but rather, the ability to focus the power of small in service of new purpose, big impact, and positive outcomes.

TAKE ACTION *Designing for small's big potential*

1.

Balance the opposites.

Celebrate tension and mix the big with the small. Big goals can help organize small actions around a common path. Combine forces and work at multiple scales simultaneously.

2.

Learn by starting.

Growing change in a system can start with micro actions. Start small and let the customer, market, or community define the final offering.

3.

Create a beacon.

It helps to see what's possible. Break the mold by providing a glimpse of the future. It can be evidence of a prototype in action, or an inspiring new vision.

4.

Focus on relationships.

Shift focus from the system to the behaviors that underpin it. Use interdependency and connection as an inspiration, not a barrier. Model change on the informal relationships.

5.

Tweak the environment.

Don't let the existing system stifle new potential. Create the platform to support change. Incubate it by removing the barriers to new options and experiments.



Growing change

Massive change doesn't have to require massive scale, excessive planning, or investment. Taking on the system can mean simply starting. Grameen Bank, one of the most successful microfinance stories to date, grew from incredibly humble roots. Mohammad Yunus kicked off the project with money from his own pocket, after being inspired by the big purpose of alleviating poverty in some of the poorest villages of Bangladesh. Instead of being stalled by a system that wouldn't cooperate, Yunus started small, identifying people's specific needs and then tailored the offering to meet them. Grameen Bank stayed true to its grassroots origins as it expanded, building largely around social capital. In other words, instead of fixating on legal constraints and industry norms, Grameen shaped its system around trust and interpersonal relationships. In evolving the model, the social dynamics were crucial: Collective responsibility generated mutual support and peer pressure and a focus on women improved long-term outcomes. The bank, which started with a loan of \$27 to 42 families in one village, today reaches 7.34 million members in Bangladesh.

How might we learn our way to the most appropriate solution?

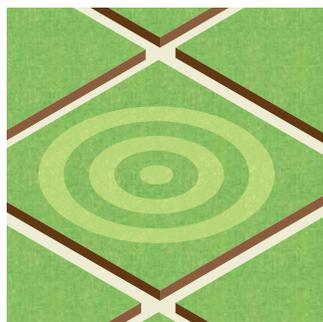
How might we achieve lofty goals by connecting with the realities on the ground?

Zooming in + scaling down

Zooming in to one part of a system to see how things fit together can help simplify what feels like massive scale of a problem. Harlem Children's Zone has been a powerful illustration of taking a shifted viewpoint. Rather than seeing an entire New York public education system, Geoffrey Canada focused in on change that was driven block by block, child by child. While the focus was small, the project's guiding intention was still a bold one, to impact the lives of thousands of children in Harlem, with an entirely new approach to supportive education. It started as a pilot on one single block, and proceeded to expand to all 96 blocks of Harlem. It is now the model for "promise neighborhoods" across the country. The "block" embraced the overall fabric that needed to change to support educational success beyond just the school itself. Starting from birth to adulthood, every aspect was integrated, incorporating family, social service, and activities into the overall solution. Real impactful change required organizing the disparate and often competing elements of the system within a small sphere around the child and his or her success.

How might we prototype integrated change and design for interdependency?

How might we see "small" at a different scale to inform the bigger system?



Sidestepping the rules

Multinationals often struggle with experimentation and balancing small change with large change. Many are finding unique ways to explore within the organization's boundaries. After 40 years of getting it just right, Starbucks wanted to experiment with how they might reinvigorate their relationship to customers and community. Rather than inching along with incremental experiments, Starbucks wanted to explore what a whole new brand approach might mean, changing the overall customer experience, atmosphere, product mix, and more. Starbucks aimed to intentionally break away from the uniformity of the existing brand and focus on being locally appropriate. Starbucks did this by essentially launching its own internally generated start-up. Beginning initially with an unbranded prototype, called 15th Coffee and Tea, Starbucks has now expanded this approach to several "live learning labs." The intention is to learn, and experiments here will inform what the company ultimately extends to the broader brand. For instance, new design styles, sustainable materials, and beer and wine offerings are already trickling through to other stores.

How might we illustrate how a future system may behave?

How might we remove the barriers to understand the potential for change?

Shining a spotlight

Many solutions are already out there, it's a matter of finding the extremes, edges and exemplars that have already changed the system from within. Positive Deviance is an approach where change is modeled after individuals who have solved the tough problems, uniquely working around the system with homegrown solutions. For instance, the simple act of breaking with an accepted norm and feeding children shrimp and sweet potatoes, was one lesson Jerry Sternin learned when seeking out a solution for malnutrition in Vietnam. Spreading this simple practice with the rest of the community contributed to a drop in malnutrition by 85% in two years.

Seeding many smalls

Large organizations are increasingly looking for ways to support the small. They are creating the situations that help move beyond old norms and embrace change. The government, foundations, universities and multinationals are all investing in platforms to support small entrepreneurial activity. The US government recently launched the Nexus program to begin to unify the multiple regional efforts, business incubators, and emerging start-ups. It's part of larger national innovation agenda with change at the heart.

Adding it up

Many services are emerging that bring together multiple micro businesses, actions, or groups through the power of new tools. FoodHub is one example capitalizing on this potential, by setting up a structure to support a regional food economy. They host a virtual marketplace for otherwise disconnected farmers and producers to more easily connect to buyers. By aggregating products together, local suddenly becomes much more efficient. It's easier to search and purchase for the customer and to market and scale for the farmers.

Finding the pivot point

A small change, implemented at scale, can have tremendous impact. In an effort to lower preventable infection rates, Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, tested a simple checklist that required doctors to confirm, among other things, that they'd washed their hands. The deceptively simple tools real magic was putting patient safety before staff hierarchy and egos. It not only shifted physicians' awareness of how preventable infection was, but also empowered nurses to question doctors. Patient infection fell from 4 percent to zero in three months. Three years later, the rate continues to stay at zero.

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