

# **Locally Driven, Globally Supported: The New Model of Leadership for Effective Systems Change**

English Sall and Jeffrey C. Walker

A traditional distinction has been drawn between two ways of leading an organization, a movement, or a broad societal project. One way is the “Top Down” model, in which instructions are dictated from “the top,” generated by one or a few powerful individuals, groups, or organizations. Another is the “Bottom Up” model, which describes grassroots projects that are led by those at “the bottom” of the social or organizational pyramid who are viewed as having proximity to the problem and its solution.<sup>1</sup>

While each of these approaches has its strengths and weaknesses, we’ve observed a third approach that has the potential to outperform either of the traditional models. We call it *Locally Driven, Globally Supported*.

*Systems orchestrators* are essential to the Locally Driven, Globally Supported approach. These individuals, first described by Julie Battilana in a 2017 article, operate in a different manner than traditional organizational leaders.<sup>2</sup> In order to solve a specific problem, they focus on unifying multiple stakeholders to coordinate action, share best practices, raise resources, and organize consistent and effective communications. Orchestrators serve as “idea holders” and “knowledge exchange agents,” holding collaborations and initiatives together to continuously move the entire body of system changers forward. And because they recognize that innovation and effective action need to be proximate to the problem, they seek to empower their various partners rather than trying to exercise control themselves.

In this article, we’ll describe the Locally Driven, Globally Supported (LDGS) leadership model and show how six organizations have used it successfully. We hope that other organizations interested in promoting social change will consider shifting to

this model—beginning with seeking out or developing potential systems orchestrators among their leaders or supporters.

## **Why Today’s World Demands a New Model of Leadership**

Historically, the Top Down model was the most widely practiced approach to leadership. Today, however, it is primarily seen in the realms of government and corporate decision-making. Many leadership experts view Top Down leadership as largely obsolete except in military command-and-control structures, in regulatory systems where rules designed to ensure public health and safety need to be enforced, and in organizations in serious need of a turnaround.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, the Top Down model has been shown to be inadequate as a way of leading efforts to generate broad-based social progress. Time and again, at the national, state, regional, local, and community levels, we’ve seen the failure of “silver bullet” solutions dictated from above. The most common cause of failure is the lack of feedback, input, or buy-in from those in the community who are most affected by the issues that the imposed solutions attempt to solve.

By contrast, the Bottom Up model strives to incorporate the insights of those who are proximate to the problems, who often know best what will and won’t work for their communities. Bottom Up leadership seeks to reflect the democratic evolution of institutions brought forth by the people. However, Bottom Up leadership has problems of its own. While the “Let a thousand flowers bloom” philosophy underlying Bottom Up leadership typically encourages innovation, it tends to waste time and resources. Because it lacks any higher-level coordinating mechanism, the Bottom Up approach is unable to identify and scale the most innovative and powerful solutions.

Neither the Top Down nor the Bottom Up leadership model lends itself to the multi-dimensional approach needed for true collaboration or to the fluid, cyclical process of ideation and information sharing needed to solve the world’s most complex problems. To meet these needs, we recommend a better model—the LDGS approach, which a number of successful organizations are already using. It marries the best

elements of the Top Down and Bottom Up models to encourage an ego-less, fluid, intentional approach to addressing complex problems and changing complicated systems.

The LDGS model has historical roots. One early example of a locally driven movement that benefited from globally supported coordination was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1957. During the early years of the Civil Rights movement, local action groups operated independently, experimenting with various strategies and tactics to advance the cause of human rights. The SCLC did not control these groups, but it provided organizing support, training, communications strategy, and fundraising help. Thus, the Civil Rights movement benefited from both the creativity generated by the locally driven model and the coordination provided by the globally supported model.

More recent examples of locally driven movements that probably could have benefited from adopting the LDGS model include the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, the global climate protests of 2015, and the Women's March of 2017. These movements generated enormously popular energy and engagement, but they largely petered out because of a lack of coordination. If they'd had small, permanent, leadership organizations to help them organize, message, train, fundraise, and share best practices, they might have been more impactful.

Movements that use the LDGS model always have a *coordinating organization* to provide the connective glue that makes real impact possible. Such coordinating organizations typically share several key features:

- The coordinating organization employs or is built around one or more systems orchestrators who understand the LDGS model and are committed to implementing it.
- These systems orchestrators are focused on driving systems change—not through direct action but by helping to create an environment where change can happen.

- The coordinating organization promotes change using tools such as policy advocacy, persuading others to act, convening problem-solving gatherings, cataloguing best practices, and developing tools that make it easy to act.
- Systems orchestrators also help the movement to build and maintain forward momentum by tracking progress, holding people and groups accountable, celebrating successes, and keeping people focused on achieving the desired change.

## **Six Examples of How the New Model Works**

To see how LDGS leadership works, here are six examples of organizations that have used this model with significant success (see Table 1 on the next page). As we'll explain, each of these coordinating organizations drives change through an open, empowering approach that attracts partners and encourages them to coalesce around a shared plan with the potential to produce genuine social progress.

**Table 1: Six Examples of the Locally Driven,  
Globally Supported Leadership Model**

<b>Coordinating Organization</b>	<b>Date Founded</b>	<b>CEO</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Scope</b>
GivingTuesday	2012	Asha Curran	Increasing generosity	Global
Teach For All	2007	Wendy Kopp	Improving educational leadership	Global
Community Solutions	2015	Roseanne Haggerty	Eliminating homelessness	United States
GirlTrek	1996	T. Morgan Dixon	Increasing peer-based health and civic activism	United States
EducationSuperHighway	2012	Evan Marwell	Providing broadband access to schools	United States
Organize	2013	Greg Segal	Improving the organ transplant system	United States

## **GivingTuesday**

This initiative was created in 2012 around a simple idea: a day that encourages people to do good. Since then, GivingTuesday has grown into a global movement that unleashes the power of “radical generosity” around the world.<sup>4</sup> Led by CEO Asha Curran and organized in partnership with a global network of formally affiliated leaders in 75 countries and hundreds of regions, as well as more loosely affiliated or completely unaffiliated organizations, communities, and generous individuals in every corner of the

globe, it's an independent nonprofit organization that creates global impact through its volunteer leadership ecosystem. In addition to raising some \$3 billion in a single 24-hour period in the U.S. alone in 2020, its global network collaborates year-round to inspire generosity around the world, recording billions of acts of generosity annually.

The impact of GivingTuesday depends upon its use of the LDGS model. The central nonprofit, which calls itself the “nucleus” of the global effort, provides services and support that only a global organization could generate. For example, it raises funds from foundations, corporations, and individuals to support the creation of systems to track effectiveness, to develop creative communications, to build capacity, to provide research, and to sponsor gatherings and virtual connections among their proximate partners. This coordinating organization also provides local groups with resources, guides, and toolkits, but use of these resources is optional, under the organization's “tools, not rules” principle.

Ongoing measurement and learning are key components in the work of the GivingTuesday ecosystem. Understanding what works and what doesn't enables the replication of good ideas in hundreds of different regional and cultural contexts. There is more than one pathway to impact, and GivingTuesday approaches measurement with that understanding.

GivingTuesday, then, features distributed leadership, yet it is highly structured. Co-ownership is a guiding principle of the movement. While local leaders control how the initiative manifests in their own communities, they are unified by an overarching vision of a more generous world.

## **Teach For All**

Led by Wendy Kopp, who was previously CEO and founder of Teach For America, Teach For All is developing collective leadership training to improve education and expand opportunity for all children. Rather than a Top-Down organization with a controlling role, it is a “locally rooted, globally informed network” of 60 independent partner organizations supported by a global organization that works to

accelerate the network's progress.

Teach For All's use of the LDGS model is reflected in a number of specific practices. For example, Teach For All doesn't initiate the movement's expansion into any given country. Rather, local social entrepreneurs decide to pursue the idea, often inspired by other network organizations in their regions of the world. Teach For All's global team follows their lead, helping them learn about the approach and develop contextualized plans to adapt it to their countries.

Furthermore, while Teach For All's network partners are united around a shared purpose, a theory of change, a set of unifying principles, and a number of programmatic and organizational commitments, there's no prescribed approach to living into these commitments. Rather, network partners make their own choices, informed by their context, culture, and opportunities. As founder Wendy Kopp explained in an article co-authored with two other Teach For All Leaders:

We've seen that differences in culture, experience, and circumstance generate new ideas and novel approaches. We never could have imagined the innovations that staff members, teachers, alumni, students, community partners and others across our network have pioneered in a single decade, and the ways in which network partners inspire and enable each other to meet higher and higher bars.<sup>5</sup>

Teach For All's coordinating organization uses its resources to accelerate progress in a number of ways—building awareness of the network's approach; generating global resources and relationships; providing coaching and consulting to network partners, enabling network connectivity, and providing access to learning experiences and tools from the network. At the same time, partner organizations and the teachers and alumni affiliated with them use the network to share ideas and innovations across borders, making it easier for promising ideas to be recognized and adopted in countries around the world. Thus, the systems orchestrators who staff Teach

For All's coordinating team provide the collaborative glue that holds the network together.

## Community Solutions

In 2015, led by Rosanne Haggerty, Community Solutions launched Built For Zero, a network of cities and counties committed to ending homelessness, beginning with chronic and veteran homelessness. Since then, it has grown into a movement of more than 80 communities in the United States that are working to prove that the problem of homelessness is solvable. In April, 2021, Community Solutions won the \$100 million award from the McArthur Foundation's 100&Change competition.

Community Solutions does not impose a one-size-fits-all model on the communities it works with. Instead, it works with leaders from a range of organizations in each participating city, county or region to form a single, community-wide team to reach a homelessness rate of "functional zero"—that is, rare overall and, when it occurs, quickly resolved. Local team members typically include homeless services providers, government agencies, and Veterans' Affairs offices, as well as church and civic groups. Community Solutions coaches these teams in adopting the shared, measurable aim of ending homelessness and in organizing their efforts through a collaborative, data-driven process. These teams create and maintain a complete, person-specific real time record of homelessness that is continuously updated. Teams use this data to meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and streamline the process of moving people into stable homes; to constantly assess what strategies are most successful in reducing homelessness, and to track how homelessness itself is shifting and where efforts and investments can have the greatest impact on reductions.

As various tactics are devised and tested in particular communities, the resulting insights are shared by Community Solutions' coordinating team of systems orchestrators, facilitating learning and growth around the country. These efforts have already been so successful that 14 of the communities partnering with Community

Solutions have effectively ended veteran or chronic homelessness, and more than half have seen statistically significant reductions.

### [Girl Trek](#)

Led by T. Morgan Dixon and Vanessa Garrison, GirlTrek is the largest public health nonprofit for African-American women and girls in the United States. GirlTrek encourages its one million members to use walking as a practical first step to inspire healthy living, families, and communities through advocacy efforts and a civil rights-inspired health movement. GirlTrek members support local and national policies to increase physical activity through walking, improve access to safe places to walk, protect and reclaim green spaces, and improve the walkability and built environments of 50 high-need communities across the United States.

GirlTrek has a relatively small central support team; most of its work is done on the local level by community organizers. But in the spirit of LDGS leadership, the systems orchestrators employed by the core organization leverages technology and new media to connect members and train organizers. The coordinating organization also sponsors research around health improvements, gathers stories around community-wide changes, and conducts national awareness campaigns to inspire members to form and sustain life-saving habits.

Having built an energized base of nearly ten percent of all Black women in America, GirlTrek is now advancing a health justice agenda to eliminate systemic barriers to health and advocate for policy change, both locally and nationally.

### [EducationSuperHighway \(ESH\)](#)

Founded by Evan Marwell in 2012 with the mission of upgrading Internet access for every public school classroom in America, ESH played a crucial role in connecting 43 million students to high-speed Internet. Thus it helped close the K-12 classroom connectivity gap that had previously divided the U.S. educational landscape into digital

haves and have-nots. To achieve this goal, ESG took a series of steps to create an environment in which dramatic national change was possible, including:

- Running the National School Speed Test, which created the first-ever data set to quantify the broadband challenge and demonstrate its solubility—a growth in awareness that convinced President Obama and governors in all 50 states to make upgrading school access a priority.
- Pushing lawmakers to modernize the FCC’s E-rate program and persuading 23 governors to put up hundreds of millions of dollars in matching funds for fiber construction.
- Building consensus around the goal of broadband upgrade, providing tools to simplify technical decisions for schools, and creating a price transparency web site that helped drive the cost of bandwidth down by 92 percent over five years.
- Tracking progress through an annual State of the States report, which held schools and governors accountable while also encouraging partners to then celebrate success.

The systems orchestrators at ESH also built partnerships with nonprofits, state and federal agencies, foundations, and community school systems, thereby driving progress from both the top and the bottom simultaneously. Having completed its mission, EducationSuperHighway ceased operations in the fall of 2020.

## Organize

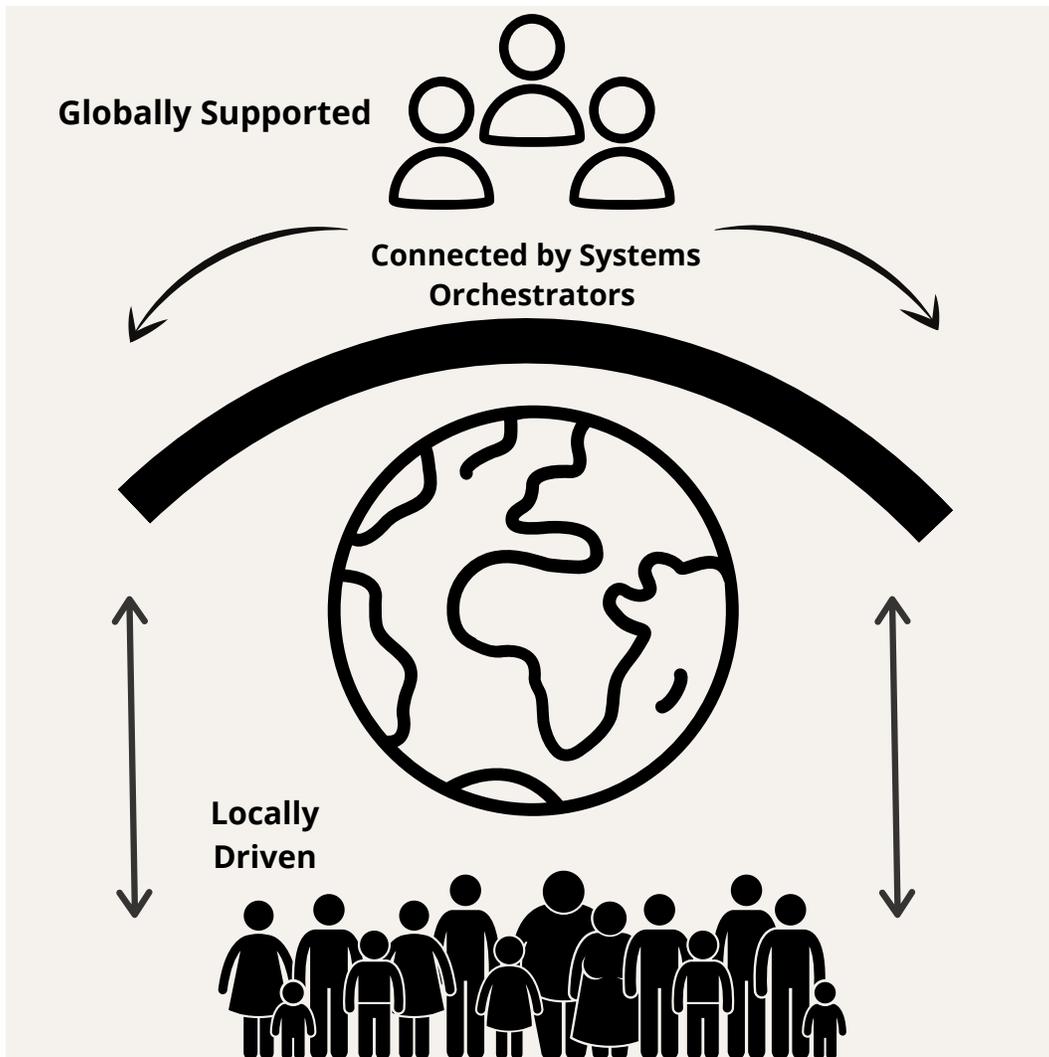
Organ transplantation is a remarkable medical technique that makes possible some 39,000 operations in the United States annually, many of them life-saving. Yet the organ donation system behind these operations is highly inefficient, resulting in an estimated failure to recover and use up to 28,000 organs that become available every year.

Organize is a nonprofit that is working to radically transform this failed system, whose problems are driven largely by the poor performance of organ procurement organizations (OPOs) that enjoy a government-mandated monopoly over the process. The systems change approach that Organize has developed is built on three pillars: pressing Congress to investigate the poor performance of the OPOs; encouraging the Department of Health and Human Services to hold OPO's accountable by enforcing recently developed metrics; and reforming government and oversight structures for OPOs, including the creation of a dedicated Office of Organ Policy. The systems orchestrators at Organize coordinates with patient advocates to raise the profile of this issue and communicate the urgency of the ongoing organ shortage, while also working closely with the government agencies most able to implement solutions.

For example, Organize served as the Innovator in Residence in the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, where it led research that ultimately informed an Executive Order and subsequent regulation to reform OPOs. Organize's research has also been heavily cited in ongoing, bipartisan, and bicameral OPO investigations by the Senate Finance Committee and the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. Essentially, Organize empowers and amplifies patient voices in the media as well as direct advocacy, and then works closely with government officials to channel that energy into well-crafted, scientifically-based reforms to better serve patients and achieve greater equity in the organ donation system.

## **The Crucial Role of Systems Orchestrators**

As the figure below suggests, the Locally Drive, Globally Supported model implies a cyclical approach to knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, collaboration, and systems change. Innovation occurs through a continuous circle or spiral of energy, egoless collaboration, and orchestration, rather than through the power dynamics that have been historically embedded in the traditional Top Down and Bottom Up models and operationalized through "savior" and "extraction" approaches.



The six exemplary cases we described in this article illustrate the fact that the LDGS leadership model requires coordinating organizations that are prepared to tackle a wide range of activities. This makes filling the role of systems orchestrator particularly challenging. In Julie Battilana’s words, systems orchestrators must “harness the power of others by finding and cultivating leadership among them—strengthening their skills, values, and sense of responsibility to act and coordinate with each other in the pursuit of social change.”<sup>6</sup> It’s a job that requires both a strong sense of self and a “managed ego” that doesn’t need the adrenaline jolt provided by power or prestige to remain energized and committed.

As we've seen, the LDGS model is already highly active in the nonprofit social change space. We believe the same model could be effective in other arenas, particularly in government-led collaborations, where innovation and best practices can be used to unify action by stakeholders in addition to government such as nonprofits, corporations, foundations, religious institutions, academic researchers, and individuals, all guided by the voices of those proximate to the problems.

Certain for-profit companies have long used models that resemble the LDGS approach. For example, IBM/JPMorgan/P&G moved with positive results from top down central units that told everyone what to do to shared-value cultures for their central groups like human resources, computer services, real estate management. These groups serve the units in the field and are evaluated by those in the field based on how effectively they help them succeed. Companies like those could learn from their internal successes and partner with other stakeholders to tackle large systems issues that are important to them and their employees such as job training, health care access, voting rights protection, educational reform, and so on.

## **How Organizations Can Begin to Apply the LDGS Model**

Philanthropists, governments, corporations, nonprofits, and other stewards of resources that would like to begin using the LDGS model to promote social change can take a number of useful steps. These include:

- Setting up small organizations at modest cost, staffed by systems orchestrators, with a mandate to unify actions by a range of stakeholders around large-scale change.
- Building initiatives and entities in which these systems orchestrators can be embedded to take movements and strategies further.
- Creating teams of systems orchestrators trained and empowered to bring system change skills to empower those who are proximate to social problem and enhance cooperation among them.

- Developing systems to capture the dynamics, relationships, and successes of the LDGS approach in a meaningful, measured way.

Creating roles for systems orchestrators at the helm of systems change organizations is crucial to tackling complex global problems. There are endless possibilities for how systems orchestrators can make lasting and resilient change by putting the LDGS model into practice.

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**Jeffrey C. Walker** is the author of the book *The Generosity Network* and a number of articles on systems change. Formerly vice chairman of JPMorgan Chase and founder and head of JPMorgan Partners, he is chairman of New Profit, chairman of the University of Virginia Contemplative Sciences Center Advisory Board, and partner in the CHAP frontline health initiative, as well as serving on the boards of the African Philanthropy Forum and the Leadership Now Democracy Reform Project.

**English Sall** holds a PhD in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and is a board member of the Sall Family Foundation as well as the boards of several global health and development organizations. English is also the co-founder of Embark, a gender justice initiative serving grass roots feminist movements and is currently serving as a post-doctoral fellow at the Carolina Health Informatics Program at University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthias Hiller, 2010, <https://www.grin.com/document/200183>

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Battilana and Marissa Kimsey, “Should You Agitate, Innovate, or Orchestrate?” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, September 18, 2017, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/should\\_you\\_agitate\\_innovate\\_or\\_orchestrate](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/should_you_agitate_innovate_or_orchestrate).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, “How Humble Leadership Really Works,” by Dan Cable, *Harvard Business Review*, April 23, 2018, which flatly states, “Top-down leadership is outdated and counterproductive.”

<sup>4</sup> Full disclosure: Author Jeff Walker is a member of the board of GivingTuesday.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Kopp, Erica Buloe, and Folaw Omikunle, “A Network Approach to Fostering Locally Rooted, Globally Informed Development,” *Medium*, September 15, 2020, <https://medium.com/teach-for-all-blog/a-network-approach-to-fostering-locally-rooted-globally-informed-development-eab0ee8c2665>.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Battilana, *op. cit.*