



Review: Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits
By Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant
January 2012

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I'm a big fan of Jim Collins and his business writings. His book *Good to Great* wasn't a standard book by an academic with musings about why some businesses succeed. Instead, it was the culmination of years of research that generated key lessons about why some businesses made the transition to great.

And more importantly for me, Collins wrote a 30 page monograph: [Good to Great and the Social Sectors](#), which did a great job teasing out what lessons there are in *Good to Great* for nonprofits. Unlike business writers who just want nonprofits to act like businesses, Collins gets that you can't equate the two for various reasons. Yet, he doesn't throw up his hands and walk away – instead he thoughtfully identifies which of the *Good to Great* lessons should still apply and how.

I was excited therefore to read that two long-time students of the nonprofit sector had decided to do a similar research project that would generate conclusions about why some nonprofits thrive. After all, helping nonprofits thrive is my personal mission!

The resulting book, [Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits](#), by Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, doesn't live up to its pedigree. It's not, in my mind, a "must read." However, I'm glad I read it and did come away chock full of ideas, some of which I've outlined below.

The central challenge facing the authors of *Forces for Good* is, unlike with business, where profits are the universal measurement of great, no such yardstick exists for nonprofits. The goal is an impact on the world – but the desired impacts are so varied that you are immediately comparing apples to oranges.

As a result, the very process the authors used to isolate which dozen organizations they would focus on to develop the "six practices of high-impact nonprofits" is inherently subjective. While they did go to great lengths to describe a rigorous process of interviews and research that led to their selection, I came away underwhelmed and unconvinced.

Nonetheless, the authors did an admirable job compiling information about the practices of the twelve organizations selected and teasing out some lessons.

The lessons in short were:

1. Both advocate **and** serve.
2. Make markets work.

3. Inspire evangelists.
4. Nurture nonprofit networks.
5. Master the art of adaptation.
6. Share leadership.

The evidence for some of these (particularly 2 and 5) seemed weak to me.

However, some of the lessons were convincing. In particular, it was interesting to read how leaders of very disparate, successful organizations used very similar language to describe keys to their success.

I was particularly intrigued by the lesson on inspiring evangelists (lesson 3, chapter 4). We live in a day and age when personal marketing peer-to-peer is having an outsized and growing influence. Nonprofits would do well to heed the book's advice about how volunteers and donors shouldn't be understood in those limited roles – but as people with whom the organization has an enduring relationship.

If you treat people in this way, you have a real shot at creating evangelists who'll turn around and provide not just money and time, but the all-important task of spreading the word to their friends and families – significantly expanding the organization's potential reach.

This is easier said than done, so I was glad the book included concrete tips for how to engage with people in ways that generate evangelists.

The lesson on Nurturing Nonprofit Networks (lesson 4, chapter 5) also had some valuable insight. I've previously written about the importance of organizations [Embracing their Role in the Network](#). Organizations that focus on creating impact not just themselves, but through a broader set of organizational relationships, are more likely to thrive over the long run. Again, *Forces for Good* excels in providing some concrete steps you can take to engage with your network.

Lastly, the lesson about Shared Leadership (chapter 7, lesson 6), had some interesting evidence about different approaches to leadership structure. In particular, at least for larger nonprofits, I was convinced by the evidence that having a strong number two executive working hand-in hand with the CEO was an important ingredient for organizations growing past a certain stage.

More importantly, I've seen first-hand the negative side where autocratic CEOs do not create a culture of shared leadership and, as a result, hire weak people who'll do what they're told. This is always a long-term recipe for failure. Board members would benefit from reading the short section on why they should look for a CEO with a strong tendency for sharing power and leadership with both the board and the rest of their staff.