

Leadership@Scale Brown Bag Recap

People have the tendency to think of large-scale change as intimidating, scary and perpetually complex. At our most recent Groupaya Brown Bag, held at Impact Hub Oakland, strategist, speaker, and social entrepreneur Ahmad Mansur shared his insights for understanding the knottiness of large scale change. In his hour-and-a-half talk, Ahmad walked us through Leadership@Scale.

Leadership@Scale is a community engagement platform based on the knowledge, patterns, and practices Ahmad developed over the last 10 years as a director, facilitator, and trainer. Ahmad identifies 7 practices critical to the success of large-scale change.



Photo by Eugene Eric Kim

The seven practices in Leadership@Scale include:

- Mobilize as an Ecosystem
- Diagnose the Challenge
- Envision the Future
- Learn for New Capabilities
- Experiment for Impact
- Connect as a Network

- Reflect for Understanding

Perhaps the most critical element required for untangling the complexity of large-scale change is defined in the second practice of Leadership@Scale: Diagnose the Challenge. In addition to gathering information and identifying patterns, diagnosing the challenge involves identifying whether a challenge is technical or adaptive. According to authors and scholars, Marty Linksy and Ronald Heifeitz, technical challenges are the easier kind of challenges; these can be easily identified and solved, often requiring changes in only one or a few places. Adaptive challenges on the other hand are complex “wicked” problems. They are much harder to diagnose, define, and solve, and often require shifts in values, beliefs, roles, and relationships.

A great example of a wicked problem is seen in the [Delta Dialogues](#), a series of meetings which Groupaya has been designing and facilitating for two years with the purpose of creating shared understanding among multi-stakeholders from the Delta around water issues in California. With wicked problems, identifying a problem as adaptive is just the first step; one of the key challenges with wicked problems is figuring out the right questions to ask.

Ahmad points out, the best questions for adaptive challenges begin with WHAT rather than HOW. HOW questions have the tendency to push toward technical challenges, using your expertise to figure out “how can we get there.” WHAT questions give you more room in an engagement process. For example, in the Delta Dialogues a critical question was, “What were the criteria that were used to develop a solution to the CA water conveyance issue? And what criteria were missing?”

Adaptive or “wicked problems” are some of the greatest and most difficult challenges facing organizations, cities, and communities. Success demands leadership capable of tackling complexity. But what does tackling complexity mean? And what

makes a leader capable of tackling complexity?

Ahmad discovered his answer after traveling the world, which he describes as his [Tocqueville](#) experience. Ahmad found there was a major shift happening across the globe. The economy was moving from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, business was moving from corporations to entrepreneurs, social was moving from justice to innovation, and leadership was moving from hierarchical to distributed.



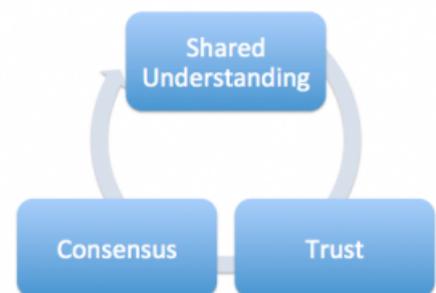
Photo by Eugene Eric Kim

Ahmad recognized that in order to address the adaptive challenges of large-scale change a new kind of leadership was needed. The old leadership's industrial age thinking and tactics are no longer capable of solving these complex problems. The emergent leadership is adaptive, connected, distributed, and relational. Ahmad began to see the rise of citizen-led innovation or ecosystems that served as platforms to address complex adaptive challenges.

Tackling complexity doesn't need to fall on a single leader's shoulders; it can be done more efficiently with an ecosystem, a community of people engaging each other around a shared purpose. When we engage with others in making a shared purpose

a reality, we are leading.

One of my questions going into the brown bag was, when thinking about mobilizing around a challenge, how do you get a large group or a group of multi-stakeholders to consensus? Unfortunately there wasn't enough time for Ahmad to answer my question but when I reflect on my experience with the Delta Dialogues I believe the first step to getting to consensus is building shared understanding. Shared understanding is about looking past each others' positions and really listening to understand the data and stories that influence our thinking.



Developing shared understanding is important because not only does it help people find common ground, shared understanding also builds relationships. As shared understanding is established and relationships are formed, trust begins to emerge. I see shared understanding and trust as fundamental to getting to a consensus.

Leadership@Scale is an approachable framework that has been used to create large-scale change, as seen with the Better Baton Rouge project – a project Ahmad designed that brought together 150 leaders across government, nonprofit, and business sectors to figure out what's best for Baton Rouge. Learn more about Ahmad and his work at <http://www.ahmadmansur.com>.

Ahmad Mansur is a leadership strategist, speaker and social entrepreneur. Ahmad helps leaders – across sectors – develop the global foresight and adaptive capacity to address complex

system challenges in regions, cities and communities. His work primarily focuses on economic growth, sustainability, educational transformation, etc.