
Harlem Children's Zone in Conversation With AchieveMission

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Patrick: Why do you do what you do?

Conrad: I have long been interested in human service nonprofits; really anything related to service. Some of it comes out of my growing up religious, and a part of it comes out of my own personal experiences that have felt challenging, tough, heartbreaking...the shaping of my personality, interest and skills. I feel privileged by my life and experiences, and within the privileges that I have, I am to return something to the world for which I feel privileged to have gained an education, opportunity, good relationships, living with joy, living with peace, being supported in various ways in my development, and filling a gap that I think exists for other people that no longer exists for me.

Mike: I'll go with why I do [this work] in the social sector. I had a long history of working in the corporate world, and I wanted to make a different kind of difference that would more address some of the deeper societal issues. I was inspired by Barack Obama's candidacy and election, which made me push to the fore [the question of] did I want to keep doing what I had been doing—senior positions in the corporate world—or try to make different kinds of changes that were more congruent with my values around social justice? And so I took the skills and experiences that I had from working at two very reputable companies [General Electric and IBM] and have put that to use by trying to help organizations like Harlem Children's Zone be the best that they can be.

Patrick: Why did you two decide to work together?

Conrad: I met Mike by way of Anne [current CEO, former COO of HCZ]. I was, I will confess, very interested because of his background. I was familiar with the leadership work of GE, both Jack Welch's management style and public persona, [and had read] some of the articles written by Suzy Welch before she was Suzy Welch, as well as *Execution*, the book by [another GE Executive, Larry] Bossidy. It was a very good book and very inspiring to me. I thought: this is incredible; here is someone from the private sector to whom I credit a great deal of talent, expertise, skill and admiration. I thought: this would be a great resource for us to have as an organization in the nonprofit sector. If he had come from another corporation I don't know if my interest would have run as deep. And so that's what attracted me to Mike, and then it deepened from there because I got to know him and his background—teaching, social work, etcetera—that had deep relevance to our own work.

Mike: when AchieveMission and Harlem Children’s Zone first started working together we didn’t have a precise project we were working on. Initially we called it “thought partnering” and Conrad was already committed to it. There had been some pilots around leadership development activity at HCZ, but there was also a recognition that more was needed. Lots of it initially was around, “what was possible” at HCZ, with me sharing some best practices or good practices—what GE and IBM had done around leadership development—and then us thinking together, what is the relevance of this for HCZ? What would make sense on a much different scale?

Conrad: In my mind, I was familiar and practiced somewhat in leadership workshops at that time. I understood something about designing them, and the content, but what I was interested in was how do you expand that into an organizational strategy to transform an organization—a deepening of skills through consistency of application, identification of the issues to tackle, and then the timing and sequencing of those. Meeting Mike was an opportunity for me to learn something about how you do that. For me, when we talk about our thought partnership, it was that: taking me beyond the course/class/workshop and into a sort of envisioning of activities, strategy arrangements, etcetera, to strengthen the organization *as an organization*.

Mike: The teaching point here is too many organizations do leadership training as events—either sending people externally as events or internally as events, one-off events. People feel good about them, but their own leadership behavior doesn’t change and the culture around leadership in the organization doesn’t change. What we’ve tried to think about at HCZ is how not to do events, but how to do something that you can call culture change, you can call it creating a leadership culture, a much more interwoven set of interventions to transform HCZ around how it thinks about leadership, what is expected of leaders at HCZ and the behaviors associated with that.

Patrick: What was the best thing you did together?

Conrad: One of the most important things we’ve done, and are doing, is learning together. I was learning about leadership development in the organizational setting, and Mike was learning about my organization, through me, and some of the issues we were facing. Our context was very productive. Our founder was transitioning out of CEO role, our COO was transitioning into the CEO role. She brought with her into that role the deep commitment and interest in personal leadership development. And so that provided a rich context for us, at least for me, to want to learn more about this because it was of great interest to her and I had seen her do some work in this space when she was COO.

After that we engaged largely to design [programming] in response to identified interest and concerns based on surveys, focus groups, conversations with me and others, and then to really target the learning to those issues at one level in particular in the organization. After that, an important thing that we we did together was to remain together. We stayed in partnership to look at what we did and how things were going. Sometimes those were just general conversations without a particular engagement outcome, but they would inform, further down the road, our next engagement and a particular set of outcomes. One of the major

achievements of our work is our Director Fellowship Program. [It is a] leadership program for our directors, custom designed by Mike and AchieveMission for us, and it followed our Assistant Director Fellowship Program, which was quite good.

The Director Fellowship program was transformative for a number of individuals in the program and, for the same reasons, it was transformative for the organization. It was a great work, in my opinion, and I am rarely satisfied with anything. But it was extremely well done. It was deliberate; individuals were connected within the Directors and with Mike as Facilitator. And it deepened our relationship and that relationship, reaching the objectives and the outcomes we had set out to reach, and informing the organization's thinking and practices. That work we are still engaged in. It was good by every measure.

Mike: Something else that might help. Like in every organization, there are multiple tiers— Senior Managers, Directors, and Assistant Directors. HCZ is a fairly big nonprofit. Directors have a fairly big scope of work. HCZ— some with our help, some without— has done [leadership development] interventions on all three tiers. That is significant [because it was] not just one tier learning and developing leadership and leaving others behind. And in the work that HCZ and AM did (that Conrad referenced) one thing that has been important as we have identified what the needs are, we both thought about leadership /management skills, individual development, 360s and Individual Development Plans, and we thought about building community among these tiers of the org so they could become more of a cohort and support system for each other. That is one area where there has been tangible evidence of progress. And then, fourthly, we did business improvement projects. [They responded to the question of] what are changes that these groups would like to see within the operations of Harlem Children's Zone? We taught business improvement skills in the context of driving those projects, which also helped to break down silo mentality of "I've got my program, you've got your program." Because HCZ is big and spread out, bringing people together to work on common programs helped people get more enthusiastic and committed to improving HCZ versus just focused on their own piece of it.

Patrick: Was all that by design, or were some of these added benefits?

Conrad: These were all absolutely designed. It seemed to me that some things had more effect and efficacy than other components. For example, the connection seemed to have real potency with regards to the program's effectiveness and its impact on the org. People really enjoyed and found fruitful the connections they were making to each other. Those were in some ways personal— connecting your story [and building] relationships— and professional, opening up spaces that were once closed between and among individuals. Because the work was different, reporting relationships were different, this connectedness was the first brick in rebuilding development as a practice inside the organization.

That surprised me. I was much more focused on the content/frameworks that was designed within the leadership program, but that took root less in some ways. Even today, not long ago, we did a focus group with some folks and the thing that came up is being in those [cohort] relationships. They weren't always productive in session with individuals, but they were instructive for the individual and their development. [And I saw it on the inside, they

were all so productive that they changed the nature of those relationships as they were interacting. People had an understanding that was different, and they exercised greater interpersonal skills in working with individuals. Again, I was surprised by that. This changed my own mindset as a professional, in terms of prioritizing that as one of the key interventions and learning objective in developing others, young people and peers, and myself, in my work.

Mike: In addition to the leadership development programs at these different tiers, other things were also happening at HCZ in parallel. [For example], the introduction of values, which becomes a language that people can reference. [They are] still at the early stages of gaining traction within the org, but it is another step. Another piece was the introduction of talent reviews to get senior managers to think together about performance and potential of direct reports and lead to more robust development planning. There has been a web of activity. It was not always tightly coordinated, but it was all aligned in a common direction of creating a more accountable, responsible and capable leadership for the organization.

Patrick: What was the hardest thing?

Conrad: To do more work that has impact—that is hard. I’ve always found it achievable in most cases to meet the task. My interest has always exceeded that. It is: what is the impact of having accomplished the task? The task falls within a complex situation; it is informed and affected by many factors within and outside of one’s control. So, [this question of impact] has been a distraction for me. It’s something I have wrestled with. It’s something I continue to wrestle with. I go back and look at the content of our programs, I think about the conversations I’ve had with others and apply the knowledge I have about the institution and leadership. I construct and deconstruct it, looking for opportunities and weaknesses in it. Those answers are hard to find.

[From all of this, I am learning that creating true impact] is more than [just having] authority. It’s influence, it’s persuading, it’s developing; it’s doing those things differently when managing. For this reason, it takes great wisdom, it takes great skill, it takes great insight... but it comes down to the leadership of an institution. And I am sad for that result and that knowledge in some ways. It makes the thing [true impact] much more tenuous than otherwise.

My fantasy is that Mike and I will get on this course together, and then we will work over the course of time to really build these things. We would measure these things, we would make adjustments, but we would be committed to making sure that the organization and its members were *changed*, changed in a good way, and that the good way would result in the organization working more deeply, working more smartly, working collaboratively in the interest of children and adults and our mission. And we would manage our egos, our ambitions, our traditions that bind us at times, and we would be the very best that we can be to achieve our intended results for the children. And so you can tell by my statements that I don’t think we got there. Yet. And I recognize that it *is* a process, and that it is a journey towards that. But I am frankly impatient for getting there.

Mike: Rightly so. We should be impatient. Two things are the biggest challenges: one is that it’s easy to design and execute a standalone initiative. But it is tougher making sure they all

reinforce each other. And because the different initiatives related to culture and leadership have different owners at HCZ, making all of that fit together and making sure it is fully aligned, that is a challenge. Secondly, more to what Conrad is saying, it's [also about] making culture change happen. We've been working together for four years, and from one point of view: "Wow, that's a long time!" And from another point of view we have just gotten started. Four years is a short time. And even though HCZ is not a 2000 year-old institution, or even 100 years, it has a very strong culture that formed through its founder. And it has many employees at leadership ranks who have been there 20+ years, and so making change is a challenge. There is an institutional legacy that is an evolution. It's not a startup.

Conrad: And if I could make more clear my statement—because it wasn't clear, so this is the clearer way: I'd say the challenge is *doing, practicing*, taking a thing one has learned and applying it in the daily exercise of managing and being. It is hard for things to take root if they are not practiced. I did not find that there was as much practice around some of the things we taught and learned as might have been helpful.

Patrick: Mike, what was your experience as a white person coming into a predominately black organization?

Mike: One thing I remember, we were doing this thought partnering thing. It was just Conrad and I. Out of it came the idea to do the leadership development program. Conrad, based on our relationship said, "I'd like you and AchieveMission to do this." I remember a conversation where I said, "Ok we can do that. It would be me, a white guy, and another white woman from AchieveMission coming." I said, "Will that work?" I was concerned as a white person coming to HCZ whether I could be an effective provider of information, as someone very much outside of the culture. I remember having that question, saying to myself, "How do I ask this question?" and asking it. And I guess the fact that we are still talking is an answer.

Patrick: Conrad, what was your perception of this? How much did Mike's race matter to you?

Conrad: I would say yes, it mattered to me. I don't remember when it mattered to me. My own experience [is that] I am personally more open to these questions. I'm interested in learning and I don't particularly care the color of the vessel I learn those lessons from. But, having worked with the team and students, I have learned, rather surprisingly, that it matters a great deal. One could say generally that we move through the world somewhat superficially—not pejoratively, but we have so much to do that we go off our instincts rather than going into deeper thoughts. In human relationship work and human relations organizations, there is so much about the emotions—what does a thing feel like rather than what is a thing. Even for someone who is pretty cerebrally oriented, I still have those things and still need to bring my assumptions into submission.

Here, when you are working with a low income community of color, there is a lot of stuff and a lot of trauma in that community. And there are huge trust issues, and issues around identity, sameness and safety. And to be in an organization that was founded by black men and has succeeded by black peoples' efforts, one guards that environment and hesitates to let

people in who don't fit that mold. That is true even for individuals like myself who you can't read poverty as easily as some others here. So I would say yes, [race] matters and it is important to pay attention to.

As we've gone further in this work I'd say that it is something that I pay attention to more than I had before. And I do with some reservations actually. But, reaching people is more important to me than the politics of race. So, while we were in the AD program, we worked with Edith. She is terrific, and has rather unique and extraordinary talents. I like her very much. And we had Paola with us in the Director Program. And she has a different affectation. She is a woman of color, she is Latina, and she could code switch. She could speak the language of our culture, and the language outside of that. And that made a huge difference for people to quickly receive her and receive her message. The partnership with Mike gave her some credibility already, but [it was] also because she was a woman of color. And then when she left and we replaced her with another woman, a black woman, it even deepened from there. But it deepened also because this person was inside of our organization, not just because she was a person of color. One of the concerns I have for AchieveMission is to have individuals who come from these communities, because it matters to the community. It matters to the development of the community, building those skills inside, and it matters to the understanding to design effectively for such communities.

Mike: One more thing I would say as the external white person... It's been a great learning experience for me. My experience is that the leaders of color within HCZ that I have worked with I have felt welcomed by. And I think they actually enjoy sometimes teaching me their culture, which goes from phrases that I did not grow up with and do not currently use, and anecdotes... and I think that is really important. I think there is something that I am very respectful and very interested in sharing that helps to create the safety or conditions where people can welcome me. And I think that's an important thing for a white person to learn and do in this kind of context.

Conrad: People also experience you as self-assured and authentic. You are not trying to adopt people's culture or language or performing. And that makes a difference. Sometimes people have tried too hard to understand. Mike, in my experience doesn't do that. I think that's very helpful.

Mike: I'm not pretending to be something that I'm not. I'm a white guy, I have a corporate background, I have a different class upbringing. I know these things about me and I don't pretend I'm something other than that.

Patrick: Any closing thoughts?

Conrad: one thing that has contributed to a successful partnership and relationship in our work with AchieveMission is that you stay in the work. You stay in the relationship. Geoffrey Canada taught me this when we were interviewing for various positions together over the years that I worked with him. It was always important to him to have individuals who were committed. I knew when I took the position here at HCZ that I needed to commit to something longer than

my 3-5 years. I could read that, on the place and on him. He would look for individuals who had done the same. One day we were talking about it post-interview. He said, “It’s hard to develop mastery over something if you don’t stay with it long enough to have various experiences one needs to have to become a master at it.” He said, “People move. They do good work, but they are not really impacting anything. They are just doing good work. You have a task, you do it well, you wrap it up and you move on. But you haven’t stayed long enough to know what happens. Does that thing break down? How do you respond to it breaking it down?” Right, because when you put something in place it’s not permanently good. It changes and you go through those changes.

And, I think, having Mike as a partner over the years, he has learned a lot about us that informs this practice. He can do the 9-box in a way that is much deeper than most consultants could come in and do. He could integrate leadership development with fellowship program and the various other things we have. He understands the culture and the people within the culture. He has a history that we don’t have. We are developing trust, openness, candor... and that matters. I would say that those who are looking to do this work to think carefully and deeply about the beginning and the long middle. There are consequences, too – you can become familiar, can become so close that you can’t see the thing as objectively as you could before... that is one of the downsides depending on the length and other things. But I would say there are far more upsides and they are essential for impact.