



The Aspen Institute First Movers Fellowship Program

Assessing the Impact: 2009–2016

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The Aspen Institute

First Movers Fellowship Program

Introduction

In 2009 the Aspen Institute Business and Society Program launched a Fellowship Program for First Movers—exceptional innovators in business who are creating new products, services and management practices that achieve greater profitability for their companies and positive social and environmental impacts for the world.

The goal of the program is to strengthen the capacity of these businessmen and women to innovate and lead change in their companies. The larger mission is to build a cohort of leaders who will, over time, collectively change how business is done and how business success is measured.

Since its inception in 2009, there have been 150 Fellows from 109 companies headquartered in 21 countries complete the program. These Fellows represent a wide range of industries, from retail to automotive to technology. They also have wide ranging responsibilities within their companies, a diversity that reflects a fundamental tenet of the program: social innovation can happen anywhere along the value chain of an enterprise.

The program includes three four-day seminars over the year, during which Fellows are provided with an innovation toolkit. The seminars serve as a laboratory for the innovation project that each Fellow is required to undertake during the Fellowship. Between seminars, Fellows participate in peer coaching groups and a series of topical calls intended to support their efforts to advance their innovation projects.

Independent evaluation has been a core component of the program. Dr. Shari Cohen, an experienced evaluator of leadership programs has worked closely with the Fellowship's Design Team to assess the program's impact on the Fellow and the Fellow's company. What follows is a summary of our research from the first seven years of the program.¹

¹ The evaluation is based on phone interviews with Fellows, online surveys, written materials submitted by the Fellows, and direct observation at the Fellowship seminars. Interviews are also conducted with many of Fellows' "Thought Partners." Citations in this report are based on feedback from completed surveys from classes 2009-2016. Thought Partners are colleagues, selected by the Fellows, who serve as advisors, champions, sounding boards and connectors.

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Key Findings - Highlights:

1. Impact on Companies

Companies report significant return on their investment in the Fellowship; more than 20 have selected multiple employees for the Fellowship.

2. Impact on Individuals

Fellows report transformative impact in their level of confidence, their ability to advance an innovation in their companies, and their clarity of purpose in their work.

3. Impact on Projects

Fellows have launched wide-ranging innovations that have business benefits and create positive social and environmental change.

4. Impact on Industry

A growing number of Fellows are reaching beyond their company's borders to impact the way their industry operates.

Coming to terms with who you are as a leader, who you want to be, to gain greater confidence, and be able to develop a new set of tools to influence an organization... those are things that I take with me.

Agata Ramallo Garcia, Nike
(seventh cohort of Fellows)

Key Findings:

1. Impact on Companies

Companies report significant return on their investment in the Fellowship; more than 20 have selected multiple employees for the Fellowship.

Key impacts include:

1) Leadership growth: More than anything else, companies see the Fellowship as contributing to a high value employee's growth as a leader. Some company representatives, who serve as Thought Partners to the Fellows, report step changes in the operational effectiveness of the Fellows as evidenced by promotions, increased credibility and authority.

As Thought Partners confirm, the tools for influencing, which include storytelling, mapping the informal pathways of power in their organizations, and piloting before launching initiatives, are significant boosts to most Fellows' ability to make change in their companies and in so doing to add value. As one Thought Partner noted about the Fellow he worked with, "she is great with data, but her meetings would be sub-optimized. Now she really knows how to leverage those. So her value to the company, whatever project she gets assigned to, the chances of it succeeding are much greater and at a higher level." Another Thought Partner said of the Fellow he worked with, "he carries a lot of credibility that he did not have prior to the program." Thought Partners also confirm that as a result of the program, Fellows exhibit greater confidence and reach higher.

Through spending time with other Fellows who challenge and reframe how she thinks of [her work,] she was able to step into her role with greater purpose and confidence.

Company Thought Partner
(for Fellow from fourth cohort)

2) Fellows learn from the innovation practices of other companies: Many Fellows report that as a result of their exposure to innovators in different companies they have been able to share insights about diverse approaches to innovation and to creating social/environmental value.

3) Projects can contribute significant value to the company: In a typical business setting, innovation projects in large companies have a high failure rate, often cited at 80–90 percent. While all Fellows' projects do not ultimately succeed, more than half are seen as contributing immediate and significant value to the sponsoring organization.

For example, David Aycan, Portfolio Director at IDEO (seventh cohort), whose project involved designing and scaling a tool that helps organizations assess their creative competitiveness, said, “in terms of the project and its ability to impact IDEO, I think it could have huge material benefits financially, but I think more importantly it will contribute to the organization’s mission.”

4) Rewards and supports rising talent: Some companies value the program as a way to reward and support top talent. Program participation enables Fellows to find a way to thrive as innovators. One Thought Partner talked about the important retention role of the program for his company’s Fellow: “It allowed him to find similarly thinking people, a network he can access any time. It added a kind of diversity and freedom and exploration that he would not have had. We could have tried to create it here, but it would not be as enriching if he was only experiencing our internal environment.”

What Aspen did was take a super smart person who was operating in her box and created the right motivation to stretch [her] beyond current boundaries, and do something adjacent but completely new that will deliver tremendous value to the company.

Thought Partner
(for Fellow from fifth cohort)

5) Ripple effects: The program encourages Fellows to bring back materials and insights from the seminars to their companies. They do so in many ways: acting as an institutional resource on social and environmental innovations important to the company; using specific tools and readings from the seminars with their teams and networks; developing greater leadership skills; engaging others in their projects; and sharing insights on change leadership from the Design Team and other Fellows. Companies report that the return on investment is much greater when Fellowship-related knowledge is shared. Several participating organizations have created smaller internal versions of a “First Mover” style program. Approximately three-quarters of Fellows saw ripple effects in their organizations as a result of their participation in the program.

Anna Walker (seventh cohort) of Levi Strauss & Co. points to the broad applicability of the Aspen skill set. “The benefit really has been the skill building around asking questions, reframing, finding opportunity. Several other initiatives besides my project have come out of my team, out of me, in the last three months, that I really credit to the reflection and way of organizing and thinking and engaging and looking at new projects and challenges that came from Aspen.”

[On reframing] now I look at things from a different angle, and I do that with my team and challenge them to reframe, so those tools are helping us manage better, which ultimately benefits the company.

Carrie Hughes, Verizon
(seventh cohort of Fellows)

2. Impact on Individuals

Fellows report transformative impact in their level of confidence, their ability to advance an innovation in their companies, and their clarity of purpose in their work.

Over the seven years of the program, virtually all of the Fellows, including those whose projects did not advance or who left their companies, report that they grew as individual leaders and found the program valuable.

Many Fellows talk about the program experience as a “before” and “after,” and see participation as a turning point in their careers or in the sense of their own potential as leaders and change-makers.

Liz Vyas (seventh cohort) is now Associate Director, Asset Operations at global biotechnology company Biogen. Her project goal was to promote increased gender inclusion for Biogen and the communities Biogen serves. As a result of her participation in the Fellowship, Liz connected to a wide variety of new individual and organizational contacts. “Without the Fellowship, I would not have had a reason to approach my project sponsor, who ended up being a great ally in this process. I would not have had a reason to reach out to The White House Council on Women and Girls, to the NIH, nor to any of the internal Biogen employees with whom I spoke. Under the name of the Fellowship, I was able to cross organizational lines and boundaries that I would not have been able to otherwise.”

Fellows report four key elements of leadership growth:

1) Confidence: Erin Bina (fourth cohort), now Product Management Excellence Leader at General Electric, said, “The big change for me was that the Aspen Institute really opened up a new world of possibility for me. I am able to take that enthusiasm and that confidence to do the type of work I want to do within my organization.” For some Fellows, confidence comes from the very fact of being selected. Others gain confidence from the experience and from the fact that as Fellows, they are not alone as they work for change.

2) Motivation: One of the most distinctive components of the program is its ability to connect Fellows’ professional work to a deeper sense of purpose. This connection is the wellspring of motivation, courage and conviction necessary to advance new ideas in complex environments.

Connie Wang (sixth cohort) of LinkedIn said, “The Fellowship redefined how I saw purpose at work. It inspired me to change roles at LinkedIn, from managing global social media to bringing member stories to all of our communications internally and externally, bringing more humanity into the brand while building the brand at the same time.”

3) A toolkit: The innovation and influencing toolkit that Fellows work with and take away from the program enables them to advance their projects and to push forward other initiatives in their firms at a much higher level than before. From problem reframing to storytelling understanding informal flows of power and influence, Fellows are equipped with the frameworks and skillset they need to succeed.

Jenifer Bice (fourth cohort) of Walmart said, “Before Aspen I was thinking of the project in terms of a pure communication focus rather than asking what impact it can have on our work force and the significant work force challenges that we face. It reframed the way I think about it, talk about it, the impact it can make.”

4) A peer network: Many Fellows come to the program with networks anchored to their area of professional focus. What they’re often missing are connections to individuals in complementary and distinct industries. Despite these differences – or perhaps because of them – Fellows report exposure to new perspectives and the generation of new insights as a result of the peer network. Indeed, the peer network is the most frequently cited benefit of the program. The support and collegiality they receive from other Fellows allows them to persevere in the face of obstacles, often long after the program ends. The ability to create meaningful and enduring bonds is part of the unique Aspen approach to cohort-based learning.

Doug Coleman (seventh cohort) of Toyota summarized the feelings of many Fellows in saying, “There’s nothing quite like knowing you’re not alone in what you’re doing... having those peer connections is the best part.”

While intellectually I knew that trying to do innovation inside of a big company is not easy, and I knew that there would be other people in other companies who had similar experiences, there’s really no substitute for being in a room full of people who are going through that, and connecting with those people. It helps you to top up your resilience and to keep going by putting a floor on the downturns that inevitably happen. I came out of the end of the Fellowship in a very different spot than when I went in.

Mark Pickens, Visa
(sixth cohort of Fellows)

3. Impact on Projects

Fellows have launched wide-ranging innovations that have business benefits and create positive social and environmental change.

Most Fellows across the seven cohorts moved innovation projects from early conceptualization to implementation, often setting up pilots to test ambitious projects. Several Fellows each year have brought their initiatives to scale.

Almost two-thirds of Fellows say that without their participation in the First Movers Program, they would never have developed their innovation projects, they would not have advanced those projects, or they would have advanced them more slowly.

Jon Mangum (seventh cohort), Sales Manager at Dow Water & Process Solutions, credits the Fellowship for enabling his efforts to increase access to clean water in developing economies. “This [project] would likely never have happened if I had not been in the Fellowship... The Aspen program really helped me think about how to step back and consider the bigger picture, and tell an effective story that people can get behind and buy into.”

Aspen helped me understand the impact of using storytelling and emotion rather than data alone to engage people differently and effect change. The program also helped me add nuance and complexity in my approach to solving problems, bringing about change, and getting people aligned with a vision... I found that really useful.

Cat Oyler
(seventh cohort of Fellows)

Safir Bellali (sixth cohort) is Innovation Lead at Vans, a VF company (VF Corporation also owns brands such as The North Face, Timberland and Nautica). As part of his Fellowship project, which aimed to leverage new technologies in order to reintroduce U.S. manufacturing into the production process, Safir set in motion a series of pilot projects to significantly change the company’s approach to product creation. As a result of his participation in the Fellowship, Safir was able to bring attention to this project and to his own leadership. One of the pilot projects received the highest number of votes in an internal selection for VF “big idea” projects, and Safir was promoted into the VF Global Innovation structure and asked to represent Vans as the Global Innovation brand lead. This enabled him to speak at an entirely different level of seniority and influence in the corporation.

JoAnn Stonier (third cohort) of MasterCard set out to elevate her company’s focus on data privacy issues. As a result of the Aspen Fellowship year she was able to create “a whole program to have a conversation around privacy and information values with our employees.” JoAnn, now Executive Vice President of Information Governance and Privacy, is responsible for MasterCard’s data and privacy approaches on a global scale. “The Fellowship experience helped me identify and create many of the tools for this journey,” she said.

4. Impact on Industry

A growing number of Fellows are reaching beyond their company's borders to impact the way their industry operates.

Erin Fitzgerald Sexson (first cohort), now Senior Vice President of Global Sustainability for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy®, credits the Fellowship with giving her the tools and confidence to build the dairy industry's voluntary and proactive leadership in sustainability which is increasingly recognized as a model for other sectors. Erin's role has now expanded to collaborate with health professionals and other experts in the U.S. and globally, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. As a demonstration of the cutting edge work that Erin has led in the dairy industry, in October 2015 the White House named her one of 12 Champions of Change for Sustainable and Climate-Smart Agriculture.

Meg Burritt (sixth cohort), formerly of Raley's grocery stores and now West Coast Regional Procurement Director at Blue Apron, credits the Fellowship experience for enabling her to launch a pioneering project called "Real Good Produce." The project reduced food waste by selling imperfect produce at discounted prices. In turn, this program allowed communities that would otherwise not be able to afford produce, make healthier eating choices for their families. The project not only brought great value and exposure to Raley's, but impacted the larger industry by spurring many comparable initiatives.

Recognizing the increasing, industry-wide achievements of its Fellows, in 2015 the program launched a number of "impact clusters"—groupings of Fellows across classes who are addressing a common problem (such as financial inclusion, community development, sustainable supply chains, or linking talent development to sustainability) or who are working across the value chain within a particular area. The goal of these impact clusters is to establish communities of practice wherein practitioners can share resources, insights and strategies, with the intention of leading toward more systemic and industry-spanning change.

Success Factors

Fellows and Thought Partners across the seven years have commented on the high quality and unique approach of the First Movers Fellowship relative to other leadership programs.

What are the success factors?

1) The innovation project: The rigorous focus on a project that is both innovative and strategically significant for the company grounds the Fellowship experience. Given that companies are results focused, project successes enable Fellows to leverage the learning from the program. As one Thought Partner said, "if you can come back with concrete project advances and then use it as a way to talk to people about the 'softer' skills that helped you do so, you are much more likely to get a hearing."

2) The deep connection to personal purpose: The fact that Aspen does not shy away from deep personal exploration, and the emphasis on reflection and values also elevates the program above other professional development opportunities most Fellows have experienced.

The program helps Fellows connect with the passion and purpose that inspires their work. This is furthered by intensive immersion of three four-day seminar experiences in beautiful, remote settings.

3) The strength of the community: The quality of the group that Aspen recruits each year and the collaborative community that is created is a key success factor. Fellows and company sponsors comment that the knowledge they get from other Fellows enables them to broaden their perspectives.

4) The core pillars of the program: The program orients itself around four key and interwoven pillars: leadership, community, reflection and innovation. Taken together, these themes undergird the program’s curriculum and provide Fellows with a uniquely powerful and useful experience.

I bring a more confident version of myself to work, which has a positive impact on the team and the company.

Gyanda Sachdeva, LinkedIn
(seventh cohort)

5) The association with the Aspen Institute: While all of the above success factors could be replicated, the association with the Aspen Institute is unique to this program. Companies and Fellows perceive great benefit from the imprimatur of the Aspen Institute. The program includes a letter to each Fellow’s CEO, which often elevates the Fellow’s visibility in the company and increases confidence and willingness to take risks as a change-maker. Companies also cite the reputational benefit of having a Fellow in the program.

6) The investment by the Aspen Business and Society Program in sustaining and strengthening the network of alumni: Aspen BSP has involved alumni in the interview process, convened three First Mover Summits which bring together Fellows across cohorts, and hosted regular smaller gatherings. An estimated 70 percent of the Fellows have participated in person in one or more post-Fellowship year programs.

As the network of Fellows grows, the value and impact of the program grows as well. Participating companies are able to tap into multiple networks across classes at some of the most important companies in the world. Fellows themselves discover collaborative opportunities and leverage one another’s expertise across industries.

7) The investment in external evaluation: By integrating evaluation from the beginning of the program in 2009, Aspen demonstrates a strong commitment to accountability and to a mission of continuous relevance, impact and responsiveness to suggestions from Fellows. The evaluation also builds Aspen’s capacity to serve as a resource and thought leader for “social intrapreneurship,” helping to drive social change from within organizations.

First Movers Fellowship Design Team

The First Movers Fellowship is managed by the Aspen Institute Business & Society Program. Guidance for the Fellowship comes from a Design Team with deep expertise in innovation, values-based leadership development, community building, organizational change, program evaluation, design thinking and many other areas of core importance to the program.

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