



## Value of Leadership: What's your role in social change? *Episode Transcript*

### **Samantha Cherry:**

Disrupters. Weavers. Visionaries. Caregivers. Storytellers.

These are just a few of the roles that make-up the Social Change Ecosystem Map - a tool that took social media by storm last summer as more people found their way into the racial justice movement. On this episode of the Value of Leadership, we'll hear from the designer of the map: Deepa Iyer.

Deepa is a writer, activist, and movement builder. She designed the Social Ecosystem Map to help all kinds of individuals, networks, and organizations find roles in alignment with their values and unique skills and abilities that can be leveraged to create effective social change.

### **Deepa Iyer:**

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### **Samantha Cherry:**

It's going to take more than one type of leader to tackle our most vexing problems. So, keep listening to learn to use this tool to discover - or re-discover - how you fit into the mosaic of change-making.

This conversation was originally recorded from the stage of the 2021 Resnick Aspen Action Forum and is moderated Adria Goodson, Pahara-Aspen Education Fellow and Director of the Ford Global Fellowship at the Ford Foundation.

### **Adria Goodson:**

I'm here to welcome Deepa Iyer, the director of strategic initiatives at the Building Movement Project, where she focuses on building narratives and practices around multiracial solidarity. She is the author of *We Too Sing America*, and the former director of a national South Asian American organization. And she is the creator of the social change ecosystem framework

### **Deepa Iyer:**

Thank you so much, Adria.

### **Adria Goodson:**

Our first question for you is what motivated you to develop the social change ecosystem framework, and how have you personally used it as a leader?

### **Deepa Iyer:**

So simply put, this framework is a tool to help us do social change work better. While I conceived of it over the course of the past four years, it really took shape last year in the midst of the pandemic, and the uprisings against anti-Black racism. Even though I had been involved in social change work for two

decades, I just didn't know how to respond effectively where I should step in. I'd also left my position as executive director of a national organization, and I felt like I was in this limbo. So this framework, as I helped to develop it, it helped me understand that I could play various roles that are aligned with my values, and that contribute to the ecosystem as a whole.

**Deepa Iyer:**

So while the framework looks simple from a visual standpoint, I believe that it can lead us to profound insights, either as individual social change agents or as organizations, networks, and even movements. So the framework itself has three components, and I'll talk about those really quickly, you can see that on the screen as well. So the hub or center circle invites us to clarify our core values. The 10 roles around the hub invite us to reflect on our skills, and strengths, and how we show up as weavers, as storytellers, as builders, as visionaries, for example. Then the entire ecosystem approach invites us to consider the roles that are played by others, whom we're in relationship with or partnership with. So I'll give you a quick example of how I've used the framework recently, so in my work, I often show up as a frontline responder. In the immediate aftermath of September 11th and in the decade after, I was one of the people who responded to hate violence, to profiling, to immigration enforcement that affected South Asian, Muslim, and Arab communities.

**Deepa Iyer:**

I really built that muscle well, but this year as anti-Asian American racism related to the pandemic rose in the United States, I felt myself being called to play the role of the frontline responder. But I also paused, because I recognized in working with this framework that I didn't have the capacity to play that role in this moment. Even though I had the skills to be a frontline responder, I was exhausted, I was tapped out. So instead, I moved into the role of a guide to support other frontline responders with ideas and strategies, and also as a weaver, to connect to different communities and movements to Asian American leaders. So you too, I hope, you can gain these insights when you're working with this tool. Maybe you'll discover you're playing too many roles, or that you've outgrown a role that you're often called to play. You might discover how your ecosystem needs to be strengthened in order to create social change and systemic change, so these are some of the ways that you can utilize the framework to glean your own insights.

**Adria Goodson:**

Thank you so much, Deepa. When a leader conceptualizes themselves as part of an ecosystem, rather than an individual hero, what does that allow us to do differently as leaders, and I would say, especially over time?

**Deepa Iyer:**

You're so right, Adria, I think often in the work that we do, we reward the charismatic leader, the spokesperson who's at the mic, who's able to inspire people while coming up with strategy and seeding innovative ideas. But the truth is, and I think folks listening will probably relate to this, that it's impossible to sustain that level or that type of leadership for the long run. If we look at social change movements, we recognize that they succeed because there are multiple leaders, perhaps not even visible ones, who are playing different roles at different times. So that's why it's so important to recognize that our campaigns and movements thrive when we have a healthy and robust ecosystem, one that's really focused on tending to relationships, one that has a set of shared values, one that is focused on dealing with generative conflict.

**Deepa Iyer:**

We thrive as leaders when we recognize that we're part of a broader ecosystem, it helps us check

our ego, it requires us to be accountable to others, and it supports us when we're feeling depleted or disconnected. So I encourage everyone to reflect on our own ecosystems or our beloved communities, as Dr. King has put it. As leaders, each of you is likely connected to multiple ecosystems. So how are we tending to and preserving the relationships in those ecosystems, and how can they support our personal leadership when we recognize that we don't have to play all the roles all the time? In today's world, I think that's so important to build as Grace Lee Boggs, an Asian-American activist from Detroit has said, to build these critical connections. When we build them, we can face the tremendous challenges in front of us more effectively.

**Adria Goodson:**

Grace Lee Boggs is one of my heroes. As someone who's been in the business of supporting social movement leaders and social change leaders for about 20 years, what you say about ecosystems really resonates for me. I've especially seen leaders who come in and out of different roles, and don't necessarily choose one for their whole lives. They may be in the role of weaver, or frontline worker, or elder, as Grace Lee Boggs so gracefully entered. So I really love bringing her into this space, so thank you for that reference. So in your Solidarity Is This podcast, which is by the way an amazing podcast. I invite anybody who has not had a chance to listen to Deepa in deep conversations with people across the country and around the world, to take a chance and listen to this podcast. Way back in May, 2020, as we were entering this pandemic, you called for us to come out of this unprecedented period for ourselves, creating a future that we can all live in.

**Adria Goodson:**

You described our potential to use this pandemic to galvanize ourselves, to come out on the other side more unified and more together. I know this was a wish that many of us entered the pandemic thinking. Now, some countries are moving into a different phase with the pandemic and others are actually deeply, deeply immersed in it still. But as we leave this action forum, people will hopefully feel galvanized to build trust and counter the polarization we are experiencing worldwide in their lives and their work, and to choose their role or roles within the larger ecosystem. We've provided some tools to support people when doing that. Once a person has identified their roles, what are three, or if you have a different number that you think is a better, more perfect number, practices for maintaining a right relationship? Which is something you described, so maybe you could define that for us as well? What are the three practices for maintaining a right relationship with your own role or your roles over time?

**Deepa Iyer:**

Yeah, and I think... Thank you for mentioning and situating this in the context of the pandemic, because I think it allows us with an opportunity to apply this framework. I know that each of us has been dealing with a lot of layers of loss, and grief, and uncertainty over the past year and a half. Those of you who work directly with people affected by the pandemic in countries around the world, through service delivery or community awareness, the toll is quite intense. This is something that we need to really keep in mind, but what we have found, and this is something I'll quickly reference at the Building Movement Project, where I work. We survey US-based organizations led by people of color last year to understand the impact of the pandemic and the uprisings. What we found, not surprisingly, is that many leaders are concerned about their organization's viability and their own personal burnout. But, at the same time, these leaders express this idea of a tremendous opportunity. But this is a time when we can push for our boldest visions when it comes to changing the material conditions in people's lives.

**Deepa Iyer:**

Another visionary, Arundhati Roy, has called this pandemic a portal, a doorway into a different world.

So as we move through the threshold and into the portal, there are a few practices we can focus on. I offer these with utmost humility as I also experiment with them, course correct, and try to be in right relationship, which Adria, really is something that comes from native elders who talk about this. Being in right relationship means that you are aligned, you are in alignment with your core values, you are in alignment with your ecosystem. It's an experiment, it's something that we keep trying, learning, course correcting, and then trying again. So three quick practices that I might offer, the first is to go back to what I said earlier about really being anchored in and sharing our boldest visions. What is the boldest headline you want to see this year? Why? How can you anchor yourself to that? A second practice is to create change within the ecosystems we're part of.

**Deepa Iyer:**

We're all part of organizations and networks, and sometimes our environments can feel like pressure cookers. It is an environment where we have to produce, perform, respond to cycles of crises with very little resources. So how do we model different standards in terms of slow practice, in terms of reflection, in terms of setting boundaries, and how can other sectors such as philanthropy actually help leaders do that? Then the third practice is to find connections and commonalities. We've been talking about ecosystems, and oftentimes, our ecosystems operate in silos. We have to focus on our own community, a specific issue that's in front of us, and that's okay. But as we build our own house and we work on our issues, how can we also build connections with each other? How do we move from silos to solidarities? So those are the three practices I would offer with humility.

**Adria Goodson:**

Wow, those are really, really powerful pieces of advice and guidance. As I think about having gone through your framework, the piece that you provide in this framework, if you go down to their website and download it, you provide a set of questions and reflection questions. Some of which we used in our conversations this week, but that really hold the possibility for a frequent check-in on what you want your boldest headline to be. What would you suggest in terms of timeline? If you're using this tool, the wonderful framework that you created, how often do you use this tool as a leader? That sounds like a technical question, but reflection is actually something that takes time, and at the Action Forum, we do it once a year.

**Deepa Iyer:**

Right, I think it's so important. I think that, because again, we are working in cycles of urgency or responding to crises, we often don't take the time to do the self-reflection, to build in self-awareness, and to have conversations with others. So if you're using this tool, you could utilize it obviously with your staff, or the people that you work with, you could utilize it with your coalition partners. I often say that it's helpful to utilize it every three months, to come back to it. There is a reflection guide that I think folks have already seen, so you can work through those reflections, and every three months come back to them. I also recommend utilizing the framework when there is a crisis, so for example, if something has come up immediately and it is not clear how to respond or you're having some uncertainty, utilize it then as well. So I would say both in moments of crisis, and then for that slow practice, which is a term I recently learned and really like, to utilize it every three months.

**Adria Goodson:**

What is slow practice? Tell us about that term?

**Deepa Iyer:**

Yeah, slow practice is something I learned in a conversation I was with. It's basically, again, this notion

that in the work that we do, there is a sense of real urgency, and it's true. I mean, we're talking about issues and conditions that affect the lives of people, and they are urgent. Whether it is around access to the vaccine, as you said, Adria. I think about places like my country of origin in India, where these aren't urgent situations, so they have to be responded to. At the same time, I think it's important to think about the urgency of white supremacy.

**Deepa Iyer:**

How there are ways in which we are forced to always perform, and always produce, and always be at the mic. So differentiating and discerning between the urgency of what white supremacy wants us to do and what our communities need us to do is an important skill. In that is where we can actually develop this concept and practice around taking reflection, evaluation, stepping back, checking in with others, checking in with our core values. That's all what slow practice is, it is really about pushing the pause button. Then taking those steps before we act.

**Adria Goodson:**

Thank you so much, Deepa.

**Samantha Cherry:**

That's it for this episode of the Value of Leadership. To learn more on Deepa's work and to use the Social Ecosystem tool yourself, visit [buildingmovement.org](http://buildingmovement.org). You can also follow her on Instagram and Twitter @deepaiyer.

And if you enjoyed this conversation, check out others from the Resnick Aspen Action Forum on topics including trust building, overcoming polarization, collective leadership, and more on the Aspen Institute's website via the link in our show notes.

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