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Harvard Business Review



JUNE 2013
REPRINT F1306E

COLUMN

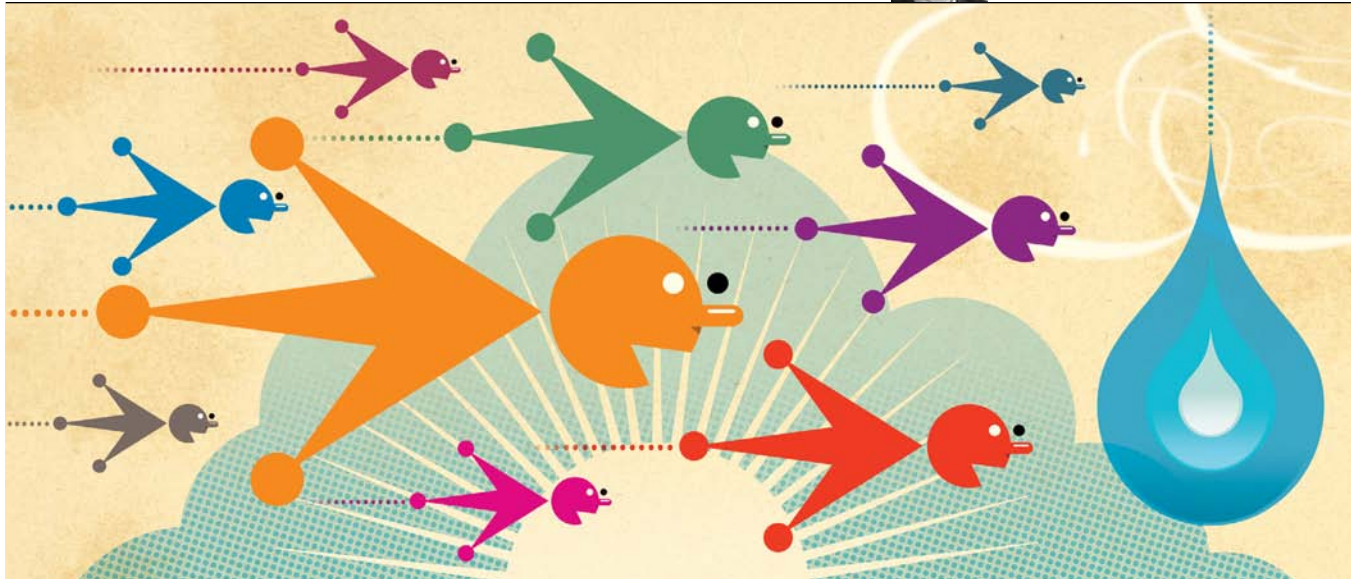
If You Want to Do Something Really Big

by John Hewko

Hewko



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If You Want to Do Something Really Big

Few Americans think about polio these days; for many it has gone the way of the steam locomotive and black-and-white TV. But this crippling viral disease still threatens children in parts of Africa and Asia. Twenty-five years ago my organization, Rotary International, joined with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to try to bring an end to it once and for all. We're almost there: Last year saw only 223 new cases worldwide. That's a drop of more than 99% from the 350,000 cases reported annually in the 1980s.

Now that we're this close, perhaps the lessons we've learned can inspire other large-scale managerial endeavors. I'll offer three in broad strokes: (1) Don't be intimidated by sheer magnitude—break the job down. (2) Make sure the goal matches your mission, and make it personal for your people. (3) Recognize that you can't go it alone.

In retrospect, polio eradication might seem an obvious task to take on. But any initiative that ambitious is extremely daunting. As a goal, however, it did have three things going for it. There was a precedent—if only one: The eradication of smallpox, declared complete in 1979, established that a human disease could be conquered. A proven approach existed: Vaccines had been developed by Jonas Salk and Albert

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Sabin in the 1950s, and Sabin's oral vaccine was particularly well suited to mass immunization campaigns. And progress toward eradication could be reliably measured, literally week by week.

You could say, then, that we were in the right place at the right time when the opportunity to make history came along. But the endeavor required substantial capabilities—and we had vital strengths to offer. Rotary's members, who currently number more than 1.2 million men and women in about 200 countries, have raised more than \$1.2 billion to fight polio. We've also applied our advocacy skills, keeping positive pressure on national governments to provide sufficient resources.

Most important, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative resonated deeply with our mission as a humanitarian service organization and our members' personal priorities. If you're going to tackle a task that will take a quarter century to complete, I think this has to be the case.

It is hard for me to describe how I felt in Mumbai in November 2011, when my wife

and I had our first opportunity to vaccinate children during an immunization drive. The first child I immunized was a little girl of about two. The memory of meeting her eyes as I placed the vaccine drops in her mouth will live with me forever. Our members have donated countless hours as volunteer vaccinators, and this hands-on involvement strengthens our determination. (Rotary clubs exist in polio-affected countries, too, so this work is not only about helping people thousands of miles away—it's about protecting "our" children as well as "theirs.")

Our 25-year commitment is of course a source of pride, but it also reinforces a healthy humility. Our organization could not have come this far alone. And we had to work in cooperation with the world's governments. The original four partners have been joined by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the United Nations Foundation, and other private philanthropies. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a sizable contribution from his own foundation in February.

With each partner bringing special capabilities and taking specific responsibilities, together we transformed a mind-boggling concept—the global eradication of a dread disease—into an achievable goal. ♥

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