

Chapter from  
*Prisoners of Hope:*  
*Global Action and the Evolving Role of International NGOs*  
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*The Art of Herding Cats*

Navigating leadership at InterAction came with its unique set of challenges and opportunities. While no entity bears responsibility for the collective direction and representation of America's international NGOs, InterAction, as an apex membership organization, plays a central role in shaping their voice and evolution. Serving as a collective hub for many of the largest U.S. NGOs, and representing the diversity of the sector, InterAction is tapped for strategic thinking, promoting organizational change, government advocacy, and the formulation of joint policy positions. At its best, it creates a unified voice and helps transform the sector. From this vantage point, I have witnessed the impact of individual projects, understood diverse NGO leaders' perspectives, and grasped the institutional behaviors of U.S. NGOs, contributing to their evolution as increasingly relevant global organizations.

When I joined InterAction, staff gave me a conductor's wand to symbolize my primary role: aligning the voices of its members. Using a different analogy, organizing the policy, advocacy, learning, and practice of U.S. NGOs, was akin to herding cats. NGOs are notorious for their independence, focused on their individual programs, fundraising, brand promotion, and claiming credit for their successes. They resemble at times solitary beasts, adept at surviving, and not easily herded or aligned. Uniting organizations with varied sizes, faiths, political orientations, and missions was a formidable task, often met with skepticism from outsiders. Yet, despite these challenges, InterAction frequently succeeded in helping U.S. NGOs both evolve and build a collective power far greater than their individual contributions.

Initially, I had reservations about taking on this role. After running Plan International USA, I was seeking new challenges, but leading InterAction felt daunting. I was concerned about the very visible public role and operating in a highly politicized environment where mistakes were publicly scrutinized. Balancing the demands of the role with my personal life was another worry. While I respected some of the previous CEOs, the organization had experienced its share of turmoil. Since its inception from the merger of two membership organizations in 1984, Peter Davies spearheaded InterAction, eventually relocating the organization from New York to Washington D.C. Julia Taft then introduced high-level impactful advocacy efforts, elevating InterAction's prominence, including as a humanitarian platform. In 2005, Mary McClymont, who had served as President and CEO for five years, left the organization in a strong advocacy and financial position. She also successfully streamlined the governance process. Under her leadership, InterAction shifted from an unwieldy structure of over 160 CEOs on its board, and a 20-person executive committee, to a more manageable 25-person board and a single annual members meeting.

Despite these achievements, the organization continued its pattern of leadership setbacks. Each successful leader before me—from its founding CEO, Peter Davies, to esteemed executives such as Julia Taft and Mary McClymont—was followed by cycles of leadership challenges each new executive lasting less than a year, interspersed with acting CEOs. These leaders struggled with the nuances of managing a small NGO, understanding a nonprofit advocate culture, leading a complex coalition, and grasping InterAction’s policy content.

By the summer of 2006, InterAction found itself in a precarious situation. I assumed the CEO role as the fourth executive within one year and was immediately confronted with challenges that threatened the organization’s existence: a looming financial crisis with no grants in the pipeline, resources sufficient for 14 staff members with a \$716,000 deficit—a situation that demanded urgent and decisive action. Fortunately, working with the board I was able to embark on a successful journey, driven by the potential to make a meaningful impact within the U.S. NGO sector. The untapped potential of InterAction remained as powerful as ever.

For years, when it was not in a leadership transition, InterAction had plateaued as a \$4 to 5 million organization, making notable contributions in standards, gender, and humanitarian action, yet seldom achieving significant breakthroughs that leveraged the entire U.S. NGO sector. This reality was underscored by the tendency of large U.S. NGOs to initiate their own projects rather than collaborating with InterAction. My direct involvement in establishing initiatives like the ONE Campaign, NetHope, Basic Education Coalition, and U.S. Global Leadership Coalition (USGLC), mirrored this pattern. Some of these initiatives, notably ONE and USGLC, eventually surpassed InterAction in scale and, arguably, influence.

Guiding InterAction’s transformation into a prominent platform for thought leadership and collective advocacy was an effort shaped by quality staff, continuous learning and adaptation. My first year felt like an intensive master’s degree program, paired with the need to immediately secure large amounts of new funding, which I found exhilarating, terrifying, and exhausting. Finding the right approach for steering such an alliance and making its voice relevant was a complex task. My style and tactics evolved over time, recognizing that leading the sector is more of an art than a science. Thankfully, strong staff leadership within InterAction made much of the successes possible.

Over 16 years, my approach, while imperfect, was honed by adhering to several key principles and strategies. These guided my interactions with member executives and shaped my leadership style. Here are the foundational principles and tools that were instrumental in leading an NGO platform:

- *Shared Principles:* View InterAction as a platform serving member interests, united by shared principles. Encourage members to focus on core principles, especially in dynamic or urgent situations. Every U.S. NGO leader wants to enhance human dignity, rights, and potential, while mitigating harm and the shocks that destroy lives. Leading such a coalition resembles herding cats, yet they all share common principles and, when asked, will steer in a similar direction.

- *Sense of Purpose:* Recognize that NGOs and their staff seek to be part of a greater cause, helping InterAction advance policies and initiatives beyond individual interests. As Americans, we have somewhat lost the belief that we can make a positive difference in our own society and the world. InterAction enables people to dream by given them space to promote ideas and principles that could move the sector.
- *Value Constituencies:* While embracing shared principles, ensure that every constituency feels heard. This includes working on understanding and respecting the diverse cultures and backgrounds within the member organizations. It also requires that the executive do their best to walk the talk by demonstrating the values binding the InterAction community together through actions, speeches, and writings.
- *Multiple Leadership Centers:* Leverage diverse expertise, by creating spaces for member CEOs and their staff to lead. In time-sensitive situations, encourage a subset of members to explore ideas and shape responses. This includes staff autonomy in influencing the U.S. government, United Nations, or other sector policies, even when not everyone is on board. Ensure that all members believe their perspectives have been considered, while being sensitive to voices that are rarely raised or less powerful. Allow complex tensions to remain unresolved and help staff discourage power plays among larger NGOs.
- *Adaptive Leadership:* Be flexible and responsive to the evolving needs and dynamics of the sector. This includes taking calculated risks in the coalition’s leadership and embracing the lessons from successes and failures. My broad understanding of NGO interests allowed me to gauge when I could stick out my neck and get member CEOs to follow. Risk-taking is an important part of coalition leadership. Do not be afraid when, at times, taking risks results in failure.
- *Initiate Change:* Encourage creative and forward-thinking solutions to sector-wide challenges. Where appropriate start small, avoiding direct confrontation with policy makers that may lead to rejection of an advocacy position. In seeking a concrete policy change, never push in a way that will force a “no” answer. Reframe the question and push from a different angle, recognizing that a breakthrough might take years. This nuanced approach has yet to be embraced by much of civil society.
- *Effective Communications:* Maintain open, transparent, and consistent communication channels with all stakeholders. Develop organizational structures around member areas of interest and that are designed to shape a consensus. Focus on personal relationships and value the ideas and dignity of colleagues. Be kind.

- *CEO Safe Spaces:* Provide a confidential environment for member CEOs to connect, share challenges, and engage beyond their roles. Moving them beyond the trappings of a role to the courage needed to transform their organizations. As an introverted leader, this implied taking significant personal risk by modeling vulnerability and inspiring others to do the same.
- *Balanced Power:* At times one cannot herd cats and some ideas can harm the collective interests of the sector, while others are positive but hard to get consensus. Exercise the right to veto ideas or positions while avoiding favoritism or ideological bias. The InterAction CEO should reserve the right to veto members and steer a particular course, but such forceful public actions should be rarely used as they can invite a backlash.
- *Collective Voice:* The President and CEO is not InterAction's voice. Its voice should come from many diverse places. Recognize the coalition's strength in the unique identity, culture, and norms of each organization, and they can achieve by working together. Encourage minority voices and the cacophony that comes with diversity.
- *Inclusive Spaces:* Ensuring diverse representation and inclusivity in all aspects of the coalition's work, particularly on sensitive issues. When the MeToo# movement hit the U.S. NGO sector, we ensured that the voices of survivors, were widely heard and contributed to shaping any commitments. They accelerated the sector's evolution.
- *Focus on Consensus:* Concentrate on areas of agreement to quickly reach consensus. If a member cannot compromise or is too politicized, they can launch an initiative outside InterAction. Look for the win-win that will have the greatest impact. This pragmatic approach enabled InterAction to deliver within 24 hours short one-page policy papers to high-level government officials.
- *Enhance Missions:* Support members in fulfilling their own organizational missions, by focusing on collective goals over individual interests. InterAction's purpose is to advance a collective mission to improve human well-being, not the pecuniary interests of individual NGOs. Solely leading with a narrow U.S. NGO focused agenda would turn InterAction into just another interest groups wrestling for influence and money.
- *Working Groups Deliver:* Trust member staff on working groups or task forces to arrive at the best conclusion by asking the right questions and facilitating space for a collective voice. They will become InterAction's best advocates and will converge on creative policy positions and ways to advocate. This approach is not about finding the least common denominator in a group, rather it involves encouraging new approaches and diverse ideas. Working group co-chairs are indispensable leaders.

- *Fresh Ideas Influence Policy*: Present fresh concepts to policymakers, combining politics with innovative ideas rooted in the operational knowledge acquired by the NGO sector. Change hinges on both politics and practical ideas. Civil society cannot be satisfied with mere presence at the table; they need a strategy to redirect and shape the conversation.
- *Field-Driven*: Ground InterAction's work in the realities of member in-country partnerships, field voices, and the ideals of individuals who are working on a daily basis with dignity, bravery, and courage to improve people's lives in challenging conditions and very diverse contexts. Their voices must be heard.
- *Find Balance*: Maintain a healthy work-life balance and practice the art of letting go when necessary. More work does not necessarily translate to better outcomes. More control and caution will not advance innovation or policy breakthroughs. If something is beyond the executive's control, let it go. Knowing when to let go and not expending needless energy on a problem without a clear answer is an art, but never easy to live.

Each of these concepts and associated lessons helped me and InterAction's senior staff shape a vast coalition and may serve as a template for anyone leading a nonprofit platform. My approach aimed at harmonizing the diverse perspectives and strengths of its member organizations, fostering a collaborative environment where shared values and goals are the driving forces behind meaningful and impactful work.

Articulating this approach was far simpler than implementing it. My leadership blind spots were often evident, and I worked to refine a style that would earn the trust of InterAction's member CEOs and their senior staff. At its best, this trust was reciprocal, extending to the staff managing working groups, and was grounded in a shared set of purpose. While there were significant failures, there were also times of impressive achievements.

The hundreds of U.S. NGO staff engaging in social change through InterAction face a fundamental personal choice: push the boundaries of possibility in a complex and chaotic world or succumb to cynicism and inaction, believing that collective change is impossible and not their responsibility. This type of work is not suited for everyone, but its rewards are immense. What stands out is not necessarily a particular achievement, but rather the unexpected personal rewards. Dedicated individuals committed to enhancing human well-being are found across the globe—in villages, slums, refugee camps, or within the confines of an InterAction conference room. Supporting these remarkable individuals, who catalyze life-changing collective efforts and right-based advocacy, made for a profoundly meaningful career.

My journey with InterAction underscores the potential for impact and fulfillment that comes from being part of a collective effort to drive social change. I am grateful for the power of collaborative work in the U.S. NGO sector and the profound effect it can have, both on global challenges and on those local civil society partners who dedicate their lives to addressing them.

