



Interview with John Kania (Collective Change Lab)

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Good morning. Can you start by introducing yourself and your organization? What would you say is the problem that your organization is working to solve, and how do you see the organization solving it?

John Kania: Good morning. My name is John Kania. I am the executive director of the Collective Change Lab (CCL).

CCL is very much a make-no-small-plans organization. We're focused on transformational change, which ultimately is about an evolution of humanity's consciousness. We feel that the way humanity, particularly the Western and colonized world, approaches problem-solving isn't getting us anywhere. We're in a world of colliding existential crises, yet amongst the mainstream don't have an effective way of making progress. When we do, it tends to be incremental. CCL is focused on developing new ways to address social problems worldwide that are deeper and more effective.

Ashley Hopkinson: Since it's not so much one-to-one direct service work, who would you say benefits from the work, and how do they benefit?

John Kania: That's a great question. We're focused on supporting social change leaders, people who are out there on the front lines working. It could be working to support the unhoused, to improve education or healthcare. There are many, many social change leaders worldwide. What's interesting to us is that the more we engage with these leaders, the more we hear from them, "We're stuck. We've tried everything, and we're still not seeing the progress we hope to see."

The other group we seek to support are philanthropists. Over the years, philanthropy has moved from just being about charity to being more about strategies that produce impact. Philanthropy is "where the money is," so it has a lot of influence on how people approach social problem-solving. Over the last three decades strategic philanthropy has made a lot of progress in areas like helping funders become more focused on investment, become more outcomes-driven, and become more focused on considering what works and how we can scale that.



However, this has led to a diminishment of some things that we believe are critical to working deeply enough to actually solve social problems. For example, the power of human relationships in overcoming challenges is less in the forefront than it used to be. There's also often less attention to the interdependencies between issues because, as people get more focused, they often stop seeing that the work they are doing in one sphere - say education - is also impacted by other spheres - say health and economic mobility. As philanthropy in many cases has gotten hyper focused, it becomes more difficult for people to understand the underlying systemic causes. CCL advocates for a different approach to problem-solving that both social change leaders and philanthropists can engage in, that's fundamentally more relational and, in our minds, has the potential to be more transformational.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's helpful. I think that's even happening within the Press Corps. When I started, I was a beat reporter. I cover education and I'm an education reporter. I cover health, and I'm a health reporter. As I'm getting into social issues reporting, I'm starting to see the interconnectedness, and how climate issues are connected to healthcare issues. I can see that happening in the funding space as well.

John Kania: I think that's exactly right, and I think this desire by many to break the whole into its parts, because it's easier to understand the parts, is the product of 100s of years of mankind's evolution in how knowledge is created. It's now so much in the water of how we, in the Western and colonized world, think about addressing problems. We're always asking: Can we fragment them into more minute parts so we can control what's going on? In fact, we can't control it. So humanity needs a fundamentally different approach. CCL is trying to help the sector move from purely rational and technical ways of addressing social and environmental problems to a much more relational way. It's not a matter of either/or, but society is way out of balance right now in its reliance on technical approaches to solve social and environmental problems.

People say, "If we can just measure outcomes better, the change will happen," But the changes have already happened, or haven't happened, by the time we measure the outcomes. If we get more precise and technical in measuring outcomes, that doesn't change much. It's how we go about engaging and addressing the issues that bring about real change. As a whole, humanity, particularly in the West, needs to get more relational in our approach to addressing social and environmental problems. But it's not just developing relationships per se, it's *deepening* the intimacy that allows us to tap into interdependencies. We, particularly in the western, colonized world need to become better at tapping into our innate humanity. CCL seeks to facilitate this through developing various relational practices that can be woven into the work. For example, we are defining and clarifying practices that support social change leaders and philanthropists in centering trauma and healing in the work of social change.



In many instances, [this trauma and healing work] is absent, which is confounding. There are so many well-meaning and incredibly brilliant programmatic approaches to solving social problems. But if we just keep overlaying program after program over these problems that are, at their core, based on intergenerational and collective and historical trauma, the programs are not going to work. They'll work to an extent, but the ability to transform the system is not going to happen unless we bring trauma to the center. This humanistic orientation is important and shows up in other ways the modern colonized world approaches problem solving. For example, the way that we think about power is a zero-sum game right now, and that needs to shift. The way that we think about narrative as a tool to collectively co-envision futures with people that are disparate from us needs to shift, as does the way we, in doing social change work, are separate from the sacred. The sacred is a part of every human being. Yet most often, in the Western, modern world, the sacred is separate from how we think about addressing, for example, the unhoused versus the housed.

People often feel icky about including spirituality and the sacred in their social change work, but we need to re-legitimize its role in supporting social change. If you look at other cultures throughout history and how they've worked to come behind their challenges, spirituality is so integrated, they can't even talk about it as discrete and separate. I can share in more detail about some of the specific initiatives that we have, but I'm trying to give you a sense of what we believe needs to shift in the modern mindset if we're to get closer to transforming this world.

Ashley Hopkinson: What specifically makes the work of Collective Change Lab distinctive? There are organizations working on systems change, but what would you say makes this work stand out in the field?

John Kania: I think to start, our worldview. We're looking to help humanity collaborate in more transformative ways, and that, ultimately, is an elevation of consciousness. I'm going to back up a little bit and give you a brief origin story to show how we got here, because I think it helps. For 17 years, I ran a nonprofit consulting firm and think tank called FSG [Foundation Strategy Group]. We were founded in 2001, and FSG grew to about 180 people. By the time I left, we were doing work around the world, across all issue areas, across geographies, and our focus was helping support the evolution of strategic philanthropy and working in the community.

In 2011, we stepped back and asked, "How do we help the field move from a focus on individual organizations to a collective focus on working in more collaborative ways? We developed and midwived a body of thinking called Collective Impact, which focused on how organizations work together across sectors to achieve big change. Partly to our surprise, that became a movement. Once we saw the resonance, we tried to support and build that movement. Within two years, Aspen and FSG had come together to form the Collective Impact Forum, which has 30,000 plus



members. Within five years, there were over 250 collective impact efforts around the world, reaching 25 million people. A couple of years after that, there was a third-party study that said Collective Impact was creating population-level change. This collaborative collective approach was working to an extent.

I was seeing community change and improved results, but I wasn't seeing transformation. I was not seeing power dynamics change. I was not seeing mental models change. I was not seeing relationships between people in the system change. That's the origin of the Collective Change Lab. I left FSG after 17 years to figure out how we can go deeper in thinking about collective change. **One of the things that makes us different is that we are focused on collective and collaborative change. There are lots of great organizations around the world that support the notion of deep change, but they're doing it at an individual or organizational level.**

My work, then, over the last 15 years has been figuring out how we support engaging with the system at a collective level. We've developed some pretty helpful modes of thinking about a system from different standpoints—from the structural level to the cultural level to some of the deeper levels, like power dynamics. That's been helpful to the field, but that still leaves the how unanswered. *How do you shift power dynamics? How do you fundamentally shift people's mental models and consciousness levels?* [Addressing] trauma is one example of that. Bringing trauma into people's awareness as part of the challenge we face [creates] the opportunity to heal in a way that can shift mental models and power dynamics.

As we've gotten into this work of deep and collaborative social change, we've realized that areas of the world aren't talking to each other. The United States by and large is self-referential. They don't tend to look outside too often. If they do, it's like, "Ah, maybe we'll get a good idea." **The global north is still often telling the global south what to do. We have an opportunity to lift up the voice of the global south. Part of what we're trying to do, and again, I think it's unique, is to connect these areas of the world. We're focusing on collaboratives and thinking about how we can create cross-regional dialogue. We have developed four transforming practices to date. One is around system storytelling, one is around collective healing, one is around transforming power, and one is around welcoming in the sacred.**

Ashley Hopkinson: I want to hear about those systems. It would be helpful too, if you could share how, as an organization, you measure success. Since you're working so closely with collectives and collaboratives, how do you identify, "Oh, we are making progress towards this deep transformational change?" How do you quantify that? I know a lot of it might be qualitative, but how do you put that into scope?

John Kania: Let me answer that by taking one of our practice areas, system storytelling.



System storytelling was derived from a conversation between myself and a colleague, Cynthia Rainer. We've both written a decent amount about social change and systems change. We were lamenting the fact that we write all these really cool stories about systems change, but we always end up elevating an individual because that's how people are accustomed to hearing stories, particularly in the Western world. It's the Joseph Campbell hero's journey model.

But that's not how social change happens. Nelson Mandela didn't just create [the resistance] to South African apartheid. There was a whole set of people involved in that movement. How do we tell stories about social change and systems change in a way that's more consistent with how social change and systems change happen? We came together and we said, "Well, the two of us clearly don't know how because we would've done it." We brought together a really interesting set of people from around the world, about a dozen storytellers who had one foot in social change and one foot in another milieu. We had people who came out of music, we had a traditional African storyteller, we had an indigenous complexity theorist, we had an incredible storyteller from Canada. We had people coming from technology, we had solutions journalism represented by David Bornstein. This incredible group came together for a year to talk about this question of how we tell stories that are conducive to social change in a way that moves beyond the hero's journey model. That hero's journey model definitely has a role. We're wired to hear the story of a person, and we end up celebrating these heroes.

The group did some phenomenal work. If you go to our website, you can look at what came out of it. Our thought was to develop system stories in and of themselves, first. It's as much about the process as it is about the product. It's bringing diverse people together within a system to make meaning of what's going on. Storytelling has always been how humanity makes meaning of what's going on. The earliest storytelling, over 10,000 years ago, was people coming around a fire, telling stories, and trying to make meaning. We asked: can we recreate that process in some respects for understanding systems?

We're pulling together a really interesting project in Colombia, post-2016 conflict. The country has seen [positive effects from] the 2016 Peace Accord, but we still have a situation where there's a tremendous amount of conflict in the country. There's a separation between various societal classes. We're looking at how we can bring people from the more elite part of society together with people who were armed combatants and came out of the jungle and people who are living in the community. How do we help them come together to make meaning around where Colombia is at this point? The hope is to move from a more retributive to a more restorative vision of what needs to happen in the country.

That's one example of system storytelling: people coming together, telling their personal stories, telling their collective stories, and then trying to make meaning collectively of what's going on.



Right now, we have a fellowship of six communities from around the world. They're all collectives, and two fellows from each of those collectives have come together with us to do collective learning and collective meaning-making. We have a bit of a curriculum that we're sharing. They're with us for one week in the first year, one week in the second year, and then every other month. They're learning, and they're going back to their communities and applying [their learnings], and then they're coming back together with us.

How do we measure that? What we're looking at, and it's based on an adaptation of some thinking on how you evaluate love, is the evolution of consciousness and the evolution of capacity.

They're all great storytellers to begin with, but the challenge is moving from heroic storytelling to system storytelling. Let's say they're starting with lower capacity and even consciousness in that area because they haven't done it before. **Part of what we're doing in the curriculum is introducing ways to think about system storytelling as different from regular storytelling. We need multiple perspectives, not one perspective.** This all came out of the year-long work we did with the community of practice that David Bornstein and others were involved with.

[Then there's the work of] Melanie Goodchild. Melanie is just a spectacular Indigenous woman living in Canada who focuses on complexity theory. Dr. Goodchild brought in this idea that when you're thinking about systems, you need to find the space in between. [We can do that through] multiple perspectives. One perspective that comes in is the intergenerational nature [of trauma]. People tend to approach systems within [the paradigm of] what's going on today, but systems are a product of what's happened through the generations. Incorporating the back story of systems starts to bring in layers of trauma that are affecting the system today. This begins to create a shift in consciousness. Then there's the capacity to be able to do this work in your community. What we're looking at there is the degree to which, over this two-year period that we're working with the fellows, there's an improvement in their capacity and their consciousness [as individuals], as well as within their collaboratives to make meaning of what's going on in their system.

Ashley Hopkinson: When a story hits one flat surface and you don't go deep, it doesn't create any kind of change. Getting multiple perspectives, getting the space in between, getting the intergenerational aspect: all those things can shift mindsets and open people up to learning more about that system or story.

John Kania: It's tricky. I'm a large fan of Amanda Ripley and the work she's done exploring how we can complicate the narrative. **At CCL we are focused on how collaborations can gain more sense of perspective. It's really hard to do that at a surface level. One of the things I firmly believe is that, if there's one tool or modality that could change the world, it's the circle, as in the restorative justice circle, for example. That very simple approach allows people to listen deeply to each other.**



I think you have to go there first, and then you can start to see connections that you didn't see before because your mind and your body are open to it.

I think, as mainstream society, we're often trying to ram things into people's heads, when what we really need to do is get into their hearts and their bodies. And not assume that we ourselves have the answers, but that we can work collectively to come up with them. There are so many people around the world who are bringing the body more front and center as a source of consciousness. Yoga, dance, somatic exercises. These have all been around for a very long time. The real work now is bringing these approaches into the collective work. It's first recognizing that we're not going to address and solve these problems on our own as individuals or organizations. We're going to have to do it collectively. We're going to have to bring people with diverse perspectives on the system together. We're very shy at revealing our innermost selves as we do the work. We often talk about getting into our hearts, but I think it is also getting to our bodies.

Our key partner in Colombia is an organization named Duna. Duna is run by two amazing Colombian women. They've been working to support the reintegration of ex-combatants into communities for close to 15 years. How do they do that? They're using yoga and they're using the body in somatic practices. The first thing is, can people be in the same room together, and then can they be in the same room together and resonate with their respective bodies? If people can start to do that, then maybe it will become easier to think about how they might jointly envision a future together. But until they get to that level of depth, it's really hard to collaborate. . As a society we are entering massive polarization. Imagine if we could bring Congress together in a large room with some great music and have everybody dancing together for six hours straight? I'm joking here, but we might be able to see some progress that we're not seeing now.

Ashley Hopkinson: In all the time you've been doing this work, are there any insights that you've gleaned or lessons that you've learned that someone else can learn from?

John Kania: If one wants to work collaboratively with others, you must build trust and relationships before you build strategy. This means that we need to invest time in that and find ways to do that. Some of what we do together may be deep and tough in terms of talking about our perspectives and our traumas, and other activities may be fun, like going camping together. It can sound ridiculously obvious, like yes, we need to spend some time with each other before we can [create change]. But it's not happening all that often in the mainstream world. As our existential crises increase in visibility, it increases a sense of urgency. And people may say, "we don't have time for all this relational stuff."

Ashley Hopkinson: We don't have time to listen.



John Kania: It's little things. Doing check-ins at the beginning of meetings and finding out where people's hearts and bodies are can have a profound difference in the conversation, particularly when working with collectives and collaboratives. Introducing ritual. It doesn't have to be religious. It can be collectively lighting a candle, or reading a poem in a variety of different ways, things like that. I think such things are starting to creep into more mainstream quarters, but they're often still thought of as a little bit silly or embarrassing.

It's really about how we deepen our relationships and intimacy. Intimacy is a funny word, but I think we're a society that's starved for intimacy, and there's a tremendous amount of numbing going on. We need to find ways to make achieving intimacy be part of the work. People do a lot of these things in their personal lives, but they don't bring them to work. If we want to go deep, we've got to support and spend time on dimensions of the work that increase our relationships and trust, particularly if we're working with people we don't know or have issues with.

Ashley Hopkinson: As a social entrepreneur, you learn as much from your successes as you learn from failures, or from things that haven't met your expectations. Can you describe something that you've tried that didn't work, or didn't work the way you hoped? What did it teach you?

John Kania: I believe the biggest leap we can make is figuring out a way to acknowledge, address, and bring into our awareness the role that trauma has played in holding us back from solving social problems. Then, we can start to engage in collective healing.

In terms of failure, up until three years ago, that concept was not even on my radar screen. Maybe it was in some intuitive part of my heart, but it's not how I was taught to work. Before I entered this sector 25 years ago, I was a business strategy consultant, and we did the work in very rational ways, with PowerPoint. When we first envisioned Collective Impact, we came up with an accessible framework that helped many people think about working collectively and get excited about it.

When we started implementing collective impact methodologies by supporting communities, we worked in all different sectors: maternal and childhood health, education, healthcare. As support teams and consultants, we would come in and work with the community, and we'd bring in our PowerPoint and our facts about what works and all that sort of stuff, and we'd try to engage people. In general, those processes went pretty well.

We were working with a community in one of the major cities of the United States that was similar to a lot of US cities and major urban areas. There was a highway that was put through the city in the 1950s, and it cut off a portion of the population. This is the area of the city that we were working with. We had been told that this was a fractious community, and that nonprofits hadn't



worked well with them before, but our process went reasonably well. We spent a couple of weeks just asking the community, "Do you want us to work here?" They said, "Yes, we could really use your help. We are a heavily under-resourced area." So we went in, and we developed a collective impact effort. The work went well, and people seemed to come together in ways they hadn't been before. I felt pretty good about it. We left after about a year and a half, and the whole effort fell apart really quickly. It had never occurred to me that maybe they needed a different kind of support. Now, with perspective, I would say that it was a heavily traumatized community, and that trauma had not been acknowledged.

Coming up with a strategy is great, but until we address a community's trauma with the right support and resources, it is really difficult to move beyond a state of stuckness. That's one example of thousands. For me, it's been a really big mindset shift. It didn't come quickly or easily, and I think we are failing a lot in our mainstream social change work. I think there are lots of places where very well-intended strategies are overlaid on this bed of trauma, and unless we walk into the trauma and look for opportunities for collective healing, we're going to stay in this cycle of one more program, one more consultant. Over the last two years, we have had an expert in trauma and collective healing as a part of our team, and I see tremendous opportunity unfolding from that.

If we think about trauma as an event that separates us from ourselves, then working through the healing process is finding a way to reintegrate that part of yourself. Often, that can open up individuals and communities. It's like a fog has been cleared from your eyes and you begin to see things. We're a traumatized society globally at this point, but I think there are opportunities to find ways to create pockets of healing, which can resonate out. That's a very different "strategy" than I would've oriented my work around 10, even 5, years ago.

Ashley Hopkinson: Aside from funding, which I know is an ongoing challenge for all nonprofits, are there any challenges that you're working to overcome? Is it public reception, or scale, or access? Do you face political opposition when you enter certain spaces, or is it a combination of factors? What are some of the sticking points in the work?

John Kania: CCL thinks about our work in a very relational way. My goal is not to convince the most hardened of hearts that the approach we are advocating for makes sense. It's to find kindred spirits. I find that more and more people, particularly among social change leaders and philanthropists, are saying, "Yes, this makes a lot of sense." My career has been focused on frameworks and helping people understand how social change works. When we created Collective Impact, so many people said, "You described what I've been doing for years, but I was never able to explain it. Now I can talk to people that I couldn't before."



I'm not in the business of inventing anything new. It's more helping people understand, and hopefully creating an inspiring way of helping people into [new ways of thinking]. What we are trying to do is to give capacity and consciousness around relational ways of working to social change leaders and philanthropists. For more than two decades, the world of strategic philanthropy and the social sector have been all about scaling. The first question is: Are you having an impact? The second question is: If so, how can you scale it? Scaling is the wrong way to think about systems change. Systems don't scale, and yet that is repeatedly the way that people want to talk about it, because it's the only frame they have.

As humanity we are a natural system, and natural systems don't scale. They harmonize and they resonate and they diffuse outward. There's no numerical way that I have seen to put a label on that yet. I think the challenge for me, and for many others, is thinking about the work in this more relational way. It is very difficult to go into the halls of traditional philanthropic power and talk about this when the prevailing question is: How do you scale it?

As I said earlier, I believe the most transformative mode out there is the circle, or really a bunch of circles everywhere. Yet I don't think the answer is we just scale the circle. Yes, there are worse ways to spend money than to scale circles, but I think it's more than that. As CCL grows our impact in the world, we need to be able to explain this in a way that will resonate with philanthropy and folks who have resources. This is one of the key challenges that we have. I believe in my heart of hearts that the scaling metaphor is not appropriate for systems. It may be appropriate for a program or curriculum or what have you, but it's not appropriate for systems, and we need to find a better way to talk about it.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you see the organization evolving over the next five years? What do you hope to see?

John Kania: We're not a direct service organization; we're a field catalyst and a field influencer. That's the model for change, so the way that we think about the future is: how do we both deepen and broaden the impact that we're having on the world? We have strategies around the depth and the breadth of what we're doing. In terms of going broad, it's a lot of the storytelling work and using stories in ways that can amplify [voices]. We have a global network of collaboratives and collective change networks around the world, so they're networks of networks that we have been working with for three years. We're continuing to write and develop thought leadership. An article that we wrote last year for *Stanford Social Innovation Review* on the relational work of systems change was their number one, most-read article for the year.

Moving forward, we want to deepen our understanding of the practices of transformational change. I mentioned system storytelling, I've mentioned collective healing, and we've got more



work to do around transforming power dynamics. What is important for us, and for the field, is understanding how we build bridges to other ways of thinking and knowing that can be helpful. For example, in the collective healing realm, we've got an article coming out on what we're calling healing systems. When we did the research around that, we went and talked to trauma and healing experts from around the world, and we realized that these people have a wealth of knowledge, wisdom and practice expertise, but they're not well-connected with the social change field.

How do we bring these two fields together? We can't expect social change leaders to overnight become experts in trauma and healing. Hopefully they will become more trauma-informed, but at the end of the day, it's a very deep expertise. We need to find ways to move the sector and other organizations doing this work toward believing in the relational side of this work, instead of thinking, "It's touchy-feely stuff that doesn't make a difference. Let's go do a PowerPoint presentation."

We want to continue to expand and have an impact. We're an organization of 10 people attempting to motivate a global change in consciousness. That might seem like folly, but the Collective Impact Movement I mentioned earlier is an example of how quickly ideas can spread. It's affected probably 50 million plus people at this point. Part of who CCI is is that we are people who can put out ideas and help people practice those ideas.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the biggest things you need from other actors or other partners in this space? Is it more expansive thinking around collective change and strategic philanthropy, or having a more systems-focused mindset?

John Kania: I think there's a lot of confusion in the sector. When we say systems or systems-focused, some people see that as highly technical work, while I see it as highly relational. There are so many terms and buzzwords out there. My hope is that people who are doing systems change work in a deeply relational way will see its value, do more of it, and talk about it. It's a bit like the racial equity movement. For white people like me, once you see it, you can't unsee it. You have a whole different consciousness. I think when people do this work with consciousness and confidence, it feels different in their bodies, and they want more of it, so they're willing to take more risks in doing it.

Part of what I do when I'm talking about systems change is talk about how we can shift mental models. Often, people think that shifting mental models is a matter of the head. Yes, you can give a different framework for people to think about things, and that's cognitive. But the real fundamental ways that people shift their worldview are through different relationships with others and through different experiences. My hope is to help people into more different experiences,



which will shift more people's mindsets. Will it be one person at a time? To a certain degree, yes, but that's why our focus is on collaboration. You can do this work collectively, with others. It's a movement, and it feels different when you're with others.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you. This was wonderful.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*