



IMPACT ARTICLE

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GEO ASKS: SIMON GREER of the SEASONS FUND FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

This month's GEO ASKS focuses on the [Season's Fund for Social Transformation](#). Founded in 2007, the Fund is a collaborative effort led by several private foundations that mobilizes resources, makes grants and supports learning activities to strengthen the connections between personal and social transformation. The Seasons Fund grantmakers believe that cultivating a leader's rich inner life is both a worthy goal in itself and an effective strategy to strengthen social change initiatives. In 2009, the Seasons Fund granted its first Transformative Leadership Awards (of \$30,000 each) to recognize [six leadership teams](#) for their work in defining the emerging field of social transformation and developing new models of leadership.

GEO ASKS: Why was the Seasons Fund formed and how does it work?

S.G.: The Seasons Fund is a collaboration created in response to what grantmakers were seeing on the ground. Organizations were grappling with issues of sustainability and collaboration. Leaders and staff were burning out. The “silo mentality” of so many efforts resulted in minimal or no impact. We recognized that something had to change.

The founders of the Seasons Fund responded by creating a new, pooled fund that would recognize and “lift up” local innovations connected to transformative leadership. Yes, we were committed to demonstrating good grantmaking practices and making smart grants. But this was something we each could do on our own. We united in order to fund organizations collaboratively and in the name of the Seasons Fund, in order to articulate that a field exists.

GEO ASKS: Your work with the Seasons Fund evolved from your own experiences as a community organizer. What did you learn working for labor and social justice that made you so passionate about bringing contemplative practices and philosophy into the workplace?

S.G.: Community organizing is demanding, draining work. Even in victories, I was experiencing defeat. The lack of resources, the constant pressure and the endless days left me continually worried about burn out. I was watching my colleagues exhaust themselves, often in just a few years of work. Despite our valiant efforts, we were inflicting damage on ourselves. I knew I wanted to change how we worked. I wanted to be involved with social transformation work, not just social change.

GEO ASKS: What is the difference between social change and social transformation?

S.G.: Many organizations do social change work. I see this as more one-dimensional — trying to change a single behavior, a policy, a law. Social transformation is more holistic and involves *total* change. The best analogy is the metamorphosis of a caterpillar. Once he turns into a butterfly, he can't go back. The same is true with social transformation. When it is made, the way things were before are no longer imaginable. To bring about such profound change, the leaders at the forefront of the movement need a much deeper grounding. And they need their own, personal transformation. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you seek in the world." This is the best tagline for social transformation.

GEO ASKS: What is an example of a leader or organization that models this change they seek in the world?

S.G.: The Seasons Fund's Transformative Leadership Awards (TLA) go to teams of leaders who, in their daily practice, are "living out" their own commitment to social transformation. It's hard to pick just one team to focus on, and I hope your readers will check out the powerful stories of TLA awardees on our web site.

[Make the Road New York](#) is a great example because it represents the conscious coming together of the leaders of two groups: Make the Road by Walking and the Latin American Integration Center. Both groups were organizing around workers' rights, health care, housing, public education and environmental justice. Their leaders recognized they had common values, despite the fact that their efforts focused on different New York communities and populations. Collaborating meant they

could have a citywide presence and ‘be bigger together.’ Make the Road New York (MRNY) is now the largest community-based, participatory organization of low-income immigrants in New York City. As part of their mission, the group supports the health and wellness of grassroots leaders by integrating inner awareness practices into their work. MRNY now partners with another Seasons Fund awardee, [Social Justice Leadership](#), to build organizational effectiveness by supporting practices that cultivate self-mastery and spiritual growth and enhance organizational culture.

GEO ASKS: These concepts are new to many leaders and grantmakers. How do you bring attention to these values and prove they are worth supporting, especially given these tough economic times?

S.G.: The proof is in the stories of the organizations working on the ground. Most people in organizing last three or five years before they burn out. But it takes eight or more years to master our craft. So many talented leaders depart well before they have reached their prime.

When we focus energy and resources on leadership development, people are happier and healthier. When we demonstrate an interest in cultivating an individual’s core values, the best people stay longer. When we honor collaboration and innovative partnerships, the strongest organizations achieve even greater results.

It’s hard to know where to place this work and I understand that when budgets are constricting, this work might seem almost indulgent at first glance. But I would argue that it is more critical than ever. Our best leaders must stay, our best organizations must be as efficient and effective as possible. We have to ground ourselves even more deeply in our core values, and we must be even more creative in our partnerships. The Seasons Fund hopes to show a new way of leading and building organizations that offers hope that social change organizations can survive and even thrive in the years to come.

GEO ASKS: What’s a first step for a grantmaker considering enhancing its support of its grantees in personal transformation, leadership development and coalition building?

S.G.: First, we hope they would call the Seasons Fund and connect with us. We have released two new RFPs that we would be happy to share, as well as a report that analyzes the 80 applicants to our Transformative Leadership Award. There’s much to be learned from our applicants and their work.

Second, start asking questions. Talk to your grantees about staff development. Show them that this is not something they have to do in secret. Twenty years ago we didn’t ask questions about staff and board diversity. Today we do, and the questions have put pressure on organizations and stimulated some movement on the issue. The same could be done with transformative leadership. If funders

started to ask the right questions — and allow real space for the answers — organizations will understand they can start paying attention to these critical issues.

Third, look at the intermediaries that are delivering strong leadership development and personal transformation programs for nonprofits. For example, the Seasons Fund supports the [Rockwood Leadership Program](#) for its work in training leaders with organizational and inner skills.

Finally, the team at the Seasons Fund is exploring strategies to make this commitment to personal transformation normative in foundations. We all are beginning to recognize that it makes sense to cover some percentage of overhead costs. Similarly, perhaps some percentage of funding could always be considered for staff development.

Simon Greer is a founding board member of the Seasons Fund for Social Transformation. He is also president and CEO of the [Jewish Funds for Justice](#), a national public foundation that helps people in the United States achieve social and economic security and opportunity by investing in healthy neighborhoods, vibrant Jewish communities and skillful leaders.