

Why Breakthroughs Emerge from Stepping Stones



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As non-profit leaders we are expected to synthesize large amounts of input and data from very diverse sources – from accomplished board members, philanthropic partners, industry press and writings, the corporate world, conferences and think tanks, and our dedicated staffs and peer groups – and then make great mission-focused decisions. As an executive leader of the All Stars Project for the last twenty years, it is probably one of the hardest and most interesting activities I have ever engaged in. And along the way, a focus on short-term results, specific objectives and resource constraints often push us away from longer term investments in innovation and transformation.

In his book, *Why Greatness Cannot Be Planned*, computer scientist Kenneth Stanley advances a provocative idea: the most significant breakthroughs in history did not emerge from people relentlessly pursuing clearly defined end goals. Instead, they emerged from what he calls “**stepping stones**” — intermediate discoveries that were valuable in their own right but only later revealed their transformative potential.

Stanley’s research began in artificial intelligence, but the implications extend far beyond computer science. His core insight is deceptively simple: when the path to a goal is unknown, optimizing directly for the goal can actually prevent you from reaching it. The reason is that the steps required to get there rarely resemble the final outcome. In complex systems, progress is circuitous. What leads to the breakthrough often looks unrelated at the start.

For nonprofit leaders, this insight is both unsettling and liberating.

We are trained to define endpoints. Close the opportunity gap. Scale our model. Increase placements by 30 percent. Raise the next \$10 million. Strategic plans, grant proposals, and board dashboards all reinforce the discipline of specifying outcomes in advance and then driving toward them with focus and efficiency.

This works well when the terrain is familiar. If we know how to refine a program, replicate a model in a new city, or improve an operational process, goal-setting is not only appropriate — it is essential.



But many of the problems we want to solve are not incremental. They are transformational. How do we move people out of poverty? How do we develop young people into leaders for a future that is still unfolding? How do we rebuild civic trust across divides? In these cases, the stepping stones are not obvious. We do not yet know what sequence of experiences, partnerships, and cultural shifts will produce the outcome we seek. Scaling in that way is real—but it is not the path available to 99.5% of non-profit organizations.

Stepping stones are not random experiments.

They are meaningful developmental processes, relationships, prototypes, and partnerships that expand capacity even if their ultimate combination or destination is unknown. They deepen skill, trust, and creativity. They create optionality, increasing the number of possible futures an organization can grow into.

This is closely aligned with the idea of compounding impact which I focus on in my last column ([*“Why compounding impact is a more transformative lens than scale”*](#)). Compounding does not require knowing the exact future configuration. It requires layering value in ways that reinforce and multiply over time. A young person who develops confidence in one setting carries that into the next. An alumnus who launches an initiative extends the developmental chain outward. A cross-sector partnership reshapes how institutions interact with one another, creating synergy and leveraging impact.

When we invest in the quality of these developmental processes, we build an environment where breakthroughs are more likely to emerge — even if we cannot yet describe them in detail.



All Stars Project Board Chair Nathaniel Christian (top left), Vice chairs Dr. Jessie Fields (bottom, center) and Drew Williamson (bottom right) and Executive Committee of the Board of Directors.

In the fall of 2023, when I was selected by the All Stars Project board of directors to become the President & CEO, I was fortunate to have a Board of Directors who embraced this out-of-the-box approach to growth. Special thanks to Board chair [Nathaniel Christian](#), our Vice Chairs [Dr. Jessie Fields](#) and [Drew Williamson](#), and the whole team. And, they continue to give counsel and support as the All Stars Project embraces this approach.

It is not without risk. Not every initiative will flourish. Some experiments will stall.

A stepping-stone strategy demands patience and tolerance for not knowing (the answer or the endpoint). It requires that we, as strategic leaders, explain why the most important outcomes may not be visible in the next quarterly report.

Playing the long game does not mean abandoning goals. It means recognizing that in complex social systems, some of our most important achievements cannot be reverse-engineered from a fully formed endpoint.

They must be grown.

If we want lasting transformation — not just growth — we must build strong stepping stones, protect developmental processes, and allow time for combinations we cannot yet foresee. That may turn out to be the most disciplined strategy of all.

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CLICK OR SCAN CODE for another Playing the Long Game article,
Why Compounding Impact Is a More Transformative Lens than Scale



CLICK OR SCAN CODE for Chris's CEO Newsletter, **Notes from the Field**.

The All Stars Project, Inc. is a privately-independently funded non-profit with a presence in six cities nationally. We have increased our revenue from \$129,000 in 1990 to \$13,760,000 in 2025 (a 100-fold increase). We have expanded from one program in one city, to ten different program models practiced from coast-to-coast. And we continue to promote and build new initiatives around a 'development through performance' approach with a heavy emphasis on afterschool programs and growth environments in partnership with the business and philanthropic sector. The author, Chris Street, began as a volunteer of the All Stars Project in 1992, joined the staff in 1993, led national fundraising from 2000-2019, and since 2020 has served as President and now President & CEO.