

Chapter Two



Taking the First Step: Finding Your Cause

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

—FREDERICK BUECHNER,
Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC

Years ago, the organization I was leading, CGLA, needed to sell its building. Positioned near the corner of Division and Wells in the City of Chicago, our staff size had outgrown the office space that served the organization well for many years. The unremarkable, two-story, box-like brick building had been purchased by the organization in 1986 for \$210,000 when the neighborhood was dominated by the Cabrini-Green Homes, a notorious public housing development on the Near North Side of Chicago. The process of demolishing the Cabrini-Green public housing units began in 1995 and was completed in 2011, marking the completion of a redevelopment plan for the neighborhood. Our organization's location, once squarely rooted in Cabrini-Green, was now considered part of the highly desirable Old Town neighborhood. There was no doubt that the property's value had increased exponentially as the community around it changed, but by how much?

In order to inform the process of selling the building, we arranged for the Illinois Facilities Fund—a lending, development, and real estate consulting firm—to conduct an appraisal of the building’s value. To my surprise, the final report concluded that “the highest and best use” of the property would be to demolish the building entirely and build something new on the land it occupied. I didn’t see that coming. The “highest and best use” of the building, it turned out, would be to turn it into no building at all.

The Highest and Best Use

I’ve often thought about that phrase—“the highest and best use”—as it relates to the use of time. For busy professionals like you, living full lives, time is your most precious resource, and there’s never enough of it.

Maybe you commute to an office each day, work full-time, and then commute home. Perhaps you care for rambunctious kids, a legion of plants, a high-maintenance pet, or an aging parent. You likely maintain a home and try to maintain your physical well-being, as well, with an exercise regimen. Perhaps you try to hit the town with your spouse or partner from time to time, hoping to have some semblance of a social life. Then there are the mundane tasks of daily life: shopping for groceries, preparing meals, and doing laundry. You occasionally need to visit the doctor, the dentist, and your barber or beautician. You reserve time on weekends to run errands. Maybe you spend an hour on Saturdays at Home Depot or Target with a few hundred of your closest friends. You’d like to find time for a family getaway, but just planning the vacation seems impossible to get to on your to-do list.

Given the full set of demands you face every day, it's critical that you find and focus on the cause that will matter most to you. There's a limited supply of time, and none of us knows just how finite our own supply may be. "Lost time," as Benjamin Franklin wrote, "is never found again." So in the spirit of getting "the highest and best use" out of the time you invest in service to your community, state, nation, or the world, let's begin to uncover your unique, distinctive, personal cause.

Ten Questions to Uncover Your Cause

My friend, Brandon Freeman, and I are in an article club together with a small group of friends. (It's like a book club, but we're too busy to commit to reading books at the same pace, so we read and discuss articles instead.) One evening, as the six of us sat in my living room discussing the topic of the moment, Brandon said, "I really don't have a passion for a cause at all. I think the idea of having a passion for something is sort of odd to begin with." Now, you have to understand that Brandon is brilliant with a wealth of talent to offer the world. He's a lawyer, a finance expert, one of the most well-read people I know, a traveler, inquisitive, and works at a prominent tech company. In other words, Brandon is an easy mark for a guy like me who spends his life connecting talented professionals to their purpose.

For weeks I couldn't get Brandon's comments out of my mind, so I eventually decided to try to explore with him where his passion for serving a cause might lie. Sometime earlier, I'd written a set of questions designed to help a person uncover their cause area. This was the perfect opportunity to give these questions a test run.

I sent Brandon an email: “I’m wondering if you’d be willing to take a few minutes to respond to some quick questions I’ve developed to help professionals who may not have a clear sense of what their ‘cause’ is in an effort to move from uncertainty to clarity.” In the true spirit of a time-strapped attorney, Brandon wrote back quickly in a two-sentence email: “Would love to help on this. I’ll set aside some time this weekend so I can give some thoughtful answers.” And late one evening about a week later, he did.

As Brandon worked through the questions, he began to identify social challenges that resonated with him: the burden of student loan debt on young people, the lack of affordable housing, cancer patients being strapped with exorbitant medical bills, and helping young people get access to a quality higher education. He also described examples of being moved when he witnessed random acts of kindness between strangers.

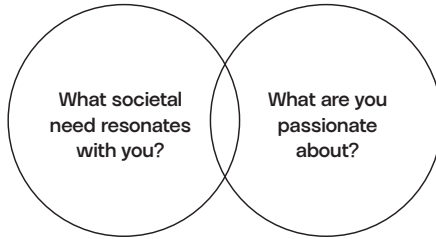
In addition to identifying a handful of specific causes, the exercise clarified for Brandon that he’s more drawn to helping individuals directly than supporting organizations that address societal challenges on a structural level. It turns out Brandon had more cause area interests than he realized at first blush.

Whatever your starting point may be—whether you’re already a Causie with more interests than you know what to do with, or you’re new to thinking about this altogether—I want to encourage you to reflect on these same ten questions. Give yourself fifteen minutes to process them and jot down your answers on the following pages.

1. What important life experiences shaped you during your childhood?
2. What is your personal value system? Who or what played a leading role in helping you develop it?
3. What are your hobbies? What activities fill you with contentment, joy, or even exhilaration?
4. What substantial challenge has impacted your life or the life of a loved one?
5. What has been a precious gift you received in life that many others aren't as fortunate to have enjoyed?

Homing in on Your Cause

These questions are designed to get the mental wheels turning on two areas of inquiry fundamental to identifying your cause: (1) What societal need resonates with you? and (2) What are you passionate about?



WHAT SOCIETAL NEED RESONATES WITH YOU?

I realize that bringing up the U.S. Internal Revenue Service—affectionately known as the “IRS”—is a sure way to get you to quit this book or use it as a sleep aid to help you doze off. But do me a favor and stick with me for a moment because this is important.

The IRS has established several classifications for tax-exempt organizations, including:

- charitable organizations such as those that focus on religion, education, healthcare, science and research, arts and culture, the environment, and social services, to name a few;
- social welfare organizations that promote the common good and general welfare of the community;
- business-oriented organizations that promote the common interests of members;
- societies and associations that provide benefits to members; and

- veterans' organizations that operate exclusively for those who have served in the military.

Now, to go one step further, the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) is a coding system developed by the National Center for Charitable Statistics to provide a standardized way of describing the activities of various nonprofit entities. (Think the Dewey Decimal

There are more than 650 unique types of charitable organizations. Your challenge won't be in finding a societal problem, need, or opportunity that could use your help.

system, but for nonprofits rather than books.) The NTEE classifies nonprofit organizations based on their primary mission or purpose.

Care to guess how many categories the NTEE has identified to classify the various types of nonprofits? The answer is pretty astounding; there are more than 650 unique types of charitable organizations. Your challenge won't be in finding a societal problem, need, or opportunity that could use your help. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of causes. They are all around

you. Consider this high-level list of the types of organizations doing social good in our society, as categorized by the NTEE:

- Arts, Culture, and Humanities
- Education
- Environment
- Animal-Related
- Healthcare
- Mental Health and Crisis Intervention

- Voluntary Health Associations and Medical Disciplines
- Medical Research
- Crime and Legal-Related
- Employment
- Food, Agriculture, and Nutrition
- Housing and Shelter
- Public Safety, Disaster Preparedness, and Relief
- Recreation and Sports
- Youth Development
- Human Services
- International, Foreign Affairs, and National Security
- Civil Rights, Social Action, and Advocacy
- Philanthropy, Volunteerism, and Grantmaking Foundations
- Science and Technology
- Social Science
- Public and Societal Benefit
- Religion-Related
- Mutual and Membership Benefit

Review this list and circle two or three categories that seem to map most closely with your responses to the Ten Questions to Uncover Your Cause. By narrowing down the categories in this way, you'll be starting to land on your answer to the question, "What societal need resonates with you?"

WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT?

While my friend Brandon initially reacted somewhat skeptically to the idea of having a “passion,” it became clear that he had a few after working through the ten questions. I especially appreciated this response: “My sister got very sick and we were all wondering how her treatment would be paid for since she had no health insurance. It turns out there’s some kind of nonprofit that sponsors certain types of cancer patients and they agreed to take care of all of her medical bills. I’m sure this played a huge role in her emotional state during treatment. It was amazing to see that these types of organizations exist.”

Brandon also reflected on how he is moved by random acts of kindness, writing: “The only time I can authentically say that I have an emotional response is when I see someone acting very kindly—for example, an elderly lady on the bus last week struck up a conversation with some young girls and showed them genuine care. She gave them some old lady pearls of wisdom. Or when someone lets you pass first on the street and gives you a big smile. Or anytime you see someone being kinder than they need to be.”

Reflecting on Brandon’s responses, his cause area might focus in on mentorship, intergenerational connectiveness, the provision of no-cost healthcare, or championing civility and kindness in society. There are plenty of organizations working in each one of these areas, but we’ll save that—finding an organizational home for your cause—for the next chapter.

As you review your responses to the ten questions, what personal passions jump off the page? When I went through this exercise, a number of my passion themes emerged, including diversity and inclusion, musical theater and the performing arts, second chances for formerly incarcerated individuals, camping, and educational equity. What comes up for you?

Head Passion and Heart Passion

When I'm working with professionals who are in the process of exploring their cause area, I like to remind them to expand their definition of passion beyond the heart. Passion is, of course, intrinsically linked to emotion. That's a good starting point. But there are other causes and organizations that could better be described as matters of the head rather than the heart.

In 2014, my colleagues Allie Hallock, Kate Effland, Alanya Green, and I traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, to interview board chairs and CEOs of nonprofit organizations that had applied for our pilot board placement program. Each forty-five-minute interview provided the opportunity for these nonprofit leaders to pitch their organization, shining a light on the mission, vision, values, and programs behind the organization's work. Nonprofit leaders are passionate folks: it's always inspiring to hear them talk about the importance of the service their organization is doing for the community.

One organization we met with spoke directly to our hearts. The mission of New American Pathways is to help refugees, and the state of Georgia, thrive. Their vision is "for new Americans in metro Atlanta to become successful, contributing, and welcomed members of Georgia's communities" by offering a comprehensive continuum of services from arrival through citizenship. Their stories of success are stirring, describing how New American Pathways helped vulnerable families fleeing war and other dangers find shelter in the United States and then learn the English language, secure employment, navigate the complexities of the healthcare system, apply for citizenship, and purchase homes. By the end of their interview, we were moved and inspired.

Shortly thereafter, we interviewed the leaders of the Atlanta Community ToolBank, which provides year-round access to tools and other costly equipment through a lending program for nonprofits serving the Atlanta region. Their motto? “Lending tools is our thing. Our services help organizations do their thing.” In 2022, the ToolBank fulfilled 749 orders for 182 member nonprofits, saving these agencies \$2.5 million dollars in purchased tools so that those monies could be reinvested in programs and services to serve the Atlanta community. That, my friend, is a smart idea.

Even so, I worried aloud with my colleagues that we wouldn’t find candidates interested in serving on the Atlanta Community ToolBank board. “Where was the emotional hook?” I wondered. “Would people get excited about this mission? After all, they don’t have moving life stories of program success.” Boy, was I wrong! In fact, the ToolBank ended up being the most requested nonprofit by our board candidates in the program’s round. The ToolBank appeals to the head rather than the heart. It’s a brilliant idea and a great solution for a specific challenge faced by Atlanta’s social good community.

Are you a Heart Passion person? Will you need to have an emotional connection to the work that will serve as an ongoing source of inspiration and motivation? Or is it more important that you connect to a really smart, compelling, innovative idea? If so, Head Passion may be at the center of what you’re looking for.

Getting Closer: Two More Questions

By this point, you are likely close to identifying your cause. You might even think you’ve landed on it. For good measure, there are two more factors that should be considered in this exploration. Answers to these

questions will also be important in matching yourself to an organization, which we'll cover in the next chapter.

1. Is your sweet spot working directly with individuals, or is having a larger societal impact of more importance to you?
2. Do you need to see the immediate impact of your efforts or are you more interested in pursuing lasting, durable change?

INDIVIDUAL IMPACT VERSUS SOCIETAL IMPACT

Direct service involves providing assistance, resources, and support directly to beneficiaries such as clients, families, students, patients, or stray animals, to name a few. Direct service work is hands-on, face-to-face, and centered on the needs of individual clients—on driving impact at the individual level.

Policy and advocacy work, on the other hand, focuses on the macro level in order to effect positive structural change. These efforts tend to center on research, awareness raising, mobilizing the public's support, and advocating for changes to the law. Policy and advocacy work seeks systemic change and enduring impact for the many rather than the individual.

An animal lover, for example, might find their cause in caring for our four-legged furry friends. We all have these people in our lives, don't we? Their social media is full of pictures of cats and dogs. The idea of a stray animal roaming the streets—hungry, injured, vulnerable to predation and disease—keeps them up at night. They absolutely will not go see a film featuring a dog that dies in the end.

There are two very different ways an animal lover might go about serving their cause. In direct services, the work might focus on rescuing strays, providing medical treatment, and finding them a permanent home. These Causes might volunteer on weekends at

the local shelter, socializing with and walking dogs as they wait for an adopted home. They are likely to provide financial resources to no-kill shelters and may drop goody bags off from time to time full of treats, chewable toys, or comfort towels.

There are also ways to help animals that don't involve coming into contact with them at all. Animal advocacy groups, for example, work to pass laws ending dog racing and restricting the breeding or sale of certain animals. You're more likely to find these Causies raising awareness about the use of animals in scientific experiments, making donations to wildlife conservation projects, protesting an unethical breeding facility, or distributing consumer education research on factory farming practices.

Which style resonates most with you? Something direct where you can experience the benefit of your service firsthand as you drive positive impact? Or something more systemic in nature that aims to get to the root of a problem, creating positive solutions for society as a whole?

IMMEDIATE VERSUS LONG-TERM IMPACT

Think also about your tolerance for the pace of change. Some of us weren't gifted with patience, after all. Count me high on that list. We never stand on a moving sidewalk at the airport, for example. You'll find us walking briskly in the left lane, annoyed with the people standing in our way. We won't wait for an ice-cream cone after dinner if the line is longer than two people. Throughout the workday, we find great satisfaction in crossing things off our to-do list. Such individuals might be inclined to focus on causes that have an immediate impact and address pressing needs with a specific action.

Others will view those types of efforts as a poor use of their valuable time and resources, opting instead to focus on lasting, sus-

tainable, long-term solutions. While they may not see firsthand the fruits of their efforts, they know they're making an investment in the future, addressing underlying issues and systemic challenges rather than reflexively responding to urgent needs.

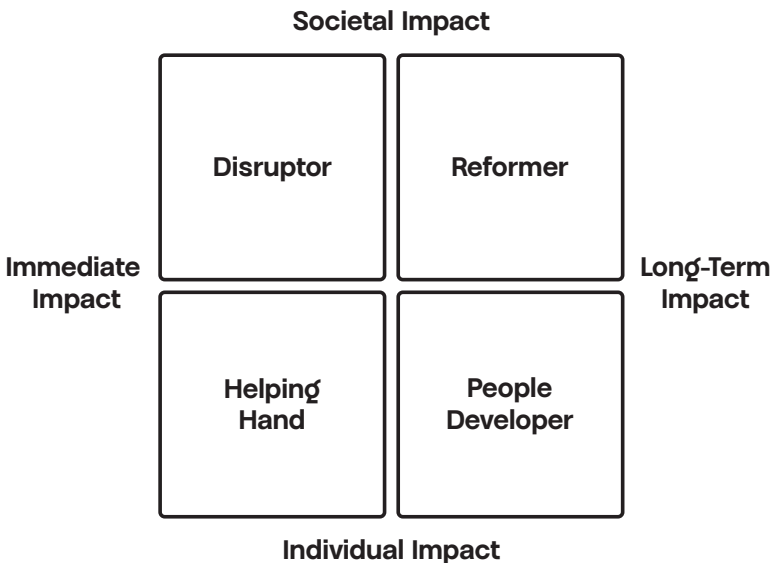
Wendy spent the first decade of her life in the foster care system and was fortunate enough to get adopted through a foster-to-adopt program when she turned eleven. Almost all of her friends from when she was younger “aged out” of the system at eighteen, largely left to fend for themselves. Many didn't fare well.

Wendy has a huge heart for foster care children and wanted to do something to make a difference in their lives. Somewhat surprisingly, however, she passed on an opportunity to mentor emancipated foster youth. Instead, she joined a recently formed organization developing a distributed housing model and offering self-sufficiency training for emancipated foster youth. As a start-up, the nonprofit wouldn't begin serving young people for more than a year, and the program design called for participants to engage over an extended period of time in educational programs, workforce readiness, financial literacy, and health and wellness activities. Wendy wouldn't likely see the fruit of her labor for many years, but she was convinced that over the long term, she would be able to support more youth by helping the budding organization find its footing. She liked the idea of a holistic program with its many components aiming for lasting change.

Where do you fall on this continuum? Is seeing the beneficial effect of your work right away of high importance to you? Or is it more important that you invest your personal resources in initiatives focused on having a long-term positive impact?

Let's Identify Your Causie Style!

By assessing where you land on these two continuums, you will be closer to understanding the cause area that is right for you. In the following two-by-two table, mark an “X” in the quadrant that most closely reflects your personal style. If you lean toward causes that help the individual rather than seek societal solutions, for example, your mark belongs somewhere below the horizontal line. If systemic impact is more important to you, your “X” will show up in the upper half of the chart. Similarly, if you want to see more immediate impact as a result of your efforts, your mark belongs on the left side of the table, but if driving long-term impact is your priority, your mark will show up on the right side of the vertical line. Having identified where you land on this graph helps you understand an important part of your Causie profile. Are you a Helping Hand, a Disruptor, a Reformer, or a People Developer?



Helping Hands are intrinsically motivated by a desire to alleviate suffering, solve problems, and make a positive impact in the individual

lives of others. Their North Star is to provide direct, immediate support to others in need, and they're not afraid to roll up their sleeves. This might manifest through work with organizations that offer guidance, resources, or practical help to individuals, families, or groups facing various challenges. Helping Hands might be drawn, for instance, to organizations focused on delivering emergency aid, disaster relief, humanitarian support, and other forms of on-the-ground assistance to those in need.

People Developers are driven by a desire to help others achieve their full potential. They seek to empower others, helping them to grow and develop over the long term. These Causes work toward creating permanent, sustainable impact in the lives of the people they work with, embodying the idea that if you can make a difference for one person, it's worth the effort. As such, People Developers might be drawn to organizations that provide ongoing services to individuals, such as mentorship programs, workforce development, or coaching to help others build skills, confidence, and self-awareness.

Reformers seek to address problems in our society by building on or modifying existing systems and structures. They strive for societal-level impact and are willing to be patient, working to improve our present world over time in order to achieve more fundamental, lasting change that will benefit future generations. Reformers might be drawn to organizations that challenge the status quo by engaging with policy, advocacy, research, and legal issues across a wide range of cause areas, working to establish policies and practices conducive to a more just society.

Disruptors seek to upend the status quo and create change by challenging existing systems or structures. These Causes aren't afraid to operate outside of established institutions, and they're open to unconventional or even controversial methods to achieve their goals.

Disruptors are focused on rapid change, often prioritizing innovation and experimentation over tradition and stability. Disruptors might be drawn to organizations working on the cutting edge of the cause areas they engage with, such as those leveraging novel applications of technology, testing innovative business models, finding unique ways to connect under-resourced communities with opportunities, and forging new types of partnerships to advance their mission.

Identify Your Style Online with MyCauseFinder.com

Cause Strategy Partners has developed MyCauseFinder.com, an online assessment tool designed to assist users in identifying their distinct approach to driving social impact. After responding to a series of questions, users will receive a personalized Causie profile to assist them in discovering their cause and identifying the ideal type of nonprofit organization for engagement. As you round out this first step in your Causie journey, consider taking fifteen minutes right now to complete the MyCauseFinder.com questions and discover your Causie style.

What's Next?

After you identify the cause area you're meant to serve, the next step is to find it an organizational home. As my colleague Ashley Bratrud describes it, “[A]fter the inner work comes the outer work of finding an organization.” The next chapter will show you how.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you expect to be drawn to causes that appeal primarily to the head or to the heart? Do you need to feel the impact of the work? Or is a really smart idea more important to you?
2. What is your Causie profile? Are you a Helping Hand, a People Developer, a Reformer, or a Disruptor?
3. Let's put it all together and try to define your cause right now before we move on. If you're stuck, consider using MyCauseFinder.com to help you get clarity. Use the following space to write it down.

MY CAUSE IS ...