



# Jeff Walker and NPower: Building on Existing Success

With a desire to help nonprofits struggling with technology, Jeff Walker discovered that a nonprofit with a similar mission already existed, and built it into a thriving national network.

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In the spring of 1998, Jeff Walker, the CEO of Chase Capital Partners, a New York venture capital firm (now CCMP Capital), gathered his friends Jerry Colonna and Chris Wearing in his Manhattan office for a brainstorming session. For Walker, joining people around a common cause was nothing new. “I love that collaborative moment, getting people to work together,” he said. “I love to see projects grow. I enjoy generating ideas and making them happen.”

Walker was a member of several nonprofit boards, and he was frustrated and intrigued because he had observed that “a lot of nonprofit organizations were wasting time and money by trying to develop their own unique technology.” Walker shared a conversation with one nonprofit ED, who had admitted: “I lost a million dollars in technology. I don’t know where it went. We got nothing for it.” Instead of reinventing the wheel, Walker believed there was an opportunity for nonprofits to share IT platforms and tools, and disseminate those that work best.

Walker and his partners set to brainstorming about how, specifically, they might address the problem they’d identified. As they bounced potential strategies around, they tapped their experience investing in the tech sector in their venture capital and private equity work. In Walker’s mind, addressing the needs of nonprofits drew on many of the same skills and passions. “Getting involved in nonprofit technology was the same thing I’d been doing in my own firm, in portfolio companies and in other partnerships.”

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## Doing their homework

As the group thought about the problem, they identified a potential pragmatic solution. Why not create a central organization that could share technology solutions among nonprofits? “If one nonprofit figures out an effective way to develop a central donor database,” Walker said, “Why can’t it share that model with others?”

Before acting on their germ of an idea, they decided to learn more about what was happening already. “Instead of starting something up to compete,” Walker

recalled asking, “why don’t we look around the country, see who else is doing something similar, and learn from them?”

Walker and his partners then tapped their deep professional networks—Walker was the chairman and CEO of CCMP Capital and chairman of JP Morgan Foundation, and served on several prominent boards—to identify individuals and organizations with relevant expertise. In the course of this informal survey of the market, they came across NPower, an organization in Seattle that had been founded, and funded in part, by Microsoft. The group researched NPower’s services, and soon realized that the Seattle organization was already pursuing their goal of helping share technology solutions among nonprofits. In addition, Walker learned, NPower’s leadership had aspirations of expanding its model nationally.

## Creating an affiliate: NPower New York

Walker and his partners decided their best path forward would be to create a New York-based NPower affiliate. “We’ll gain a lot by combining rather than setting something up on our own,” Walker said. “There’s knowledge there, and Microsoft funding, and programs they are willing to give us for free, or at least at cost.” And so to that end, Walker and his co-founders organized a group of local funders—including JP Morgan, Accenture, and The Robin Hood Foundation—to fund the new organization’s launch.



*Photo: Ken Moore*

With funding secured, Walker and his colleagues set to building the organization. Drawing from their extensive professional network, they helped hire a strong executive director to supervise the staff and manage daily operations. Walker assumed a seat on the board—a position that would allow him to exercise a deeply held belief in what he called “activist philanthropy.” Indeed, Walker’s “body of work” as a nonprofit board member was characterized by an impulse to invest himself personally—through considerable time, applied business acumen, and a knack for bringing people together around a common cause.

NPower New York relied on the home office in Seattle for the core program model, but over time the local board and staff also built on and strengthened their program offerings. Responding to identified needs, they added a central help desk to help nonprofits maintain their systems, and grew a workforce development program, which trained young adults in technology for six months, then placed them in nonprofits to assist with technology implementation.

## Challenges with national

The initial relationship with NPower’s Seattle office provided clear synergies and growth opportunities for Walker’s New York-based affiliate, but after a few years,

the organization's relationship with national began to deteriorate. The national NPower network had grown to include not only the affiliate in New York, but also new affiliates in Atlanta, Charlotte, Delaware, DC, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Texas. Unfortunately, there was not sufficient leadership from the national office to ensure consistent high quality across the growing branches. In particular, high turnover in the national executive director role set the network back. In addition, Walker and the New York affiliate team grew frustrated that the NPower network lacked a national fundraising strategy to target major national corporations. They seriously considered disaffiliating from the network, even though this would have meant losing the partnership with Microsoft.

Instead, however, leadership within Microsoft asked the New York affiliate to take over leadership of the network. Walker, his fellow board members, and the New York NPower staff carefully weighed the request. On the pro side, becoming the national office and guiding the network would allow NPower New York to disseminate its strong new program models across the country, thus assisting greater numbers of nonprofits and gaining economies of scale. In addition, being part of a national network provided increased credibility in appeals to national corporations, including their current funders JP Morgan and Accenture. On the con side, the national role would present serious challenges, including the need to strengthen the affiliates that were struggling.

To be an effective board member, Walker feels “there’s got to be something unique you do, a passionate connection.”

Ultimately, the team decided to accept Microsoft's offer; the New York affiliate became NPower's central office in 2007. Walker noted, “It was difficult, like any high-growth startup. We had to change the culture at some affiliates that weren't very effective, and that can be harder than starting from scratch. We also had to become crisp and clear on our model, and hire staff to manage the national rollout.” As he did before, Walker tapped his network to find someone who could be both the national CEO as well as the Executive Director of the New York affiliate. He offered the post to Stephanie Cuskley, whom he had known for 20 years at J.P. Morgan.

## Twelve years in

By 2010, NPower's New York office, working with nine affiliates, had a clear, three-pronged strategy: 1) a comprehensive suite of IT services for nonprofits, 2) an online portal that connects corporate IT volunteers to nonprofits, and 3) a workforce development program which trains young adults for skilled IT positions in nonprofits. NPower New York has become, over time, less linked to its affiliates but more focused on developing applications that can be shared across

the country both through affiliates and directly. NPower's services – including hardware, software, file sharing, web conferences, databases, back-ups, help desks, and many other issues – are best-in-class at discount rates, which allows over 5,000 nonprofits annually to leverage technology to advance their own missions.

## Key Takeaways

- **Do your homework:** Study the landscape so that you can build on others' work rather than duplicating efforts.
- **Involvement can create impact:** If you're prepared for hard work, then donating your time can generate as much impact as donating your money. But don't create expectations you can't fulfill.

Walker stepped down from the board in 2009. But during his 12 years on NPower's board, 10 as board chairman, he was keenly interested in drawing on his fellow board members' individual talents and passions. "I try to go around to each member each year and say, 'Okay, what are you going

to do for this nonprofit?' " He believes that in order to be an effective director, "there's got to be something unique you do, a passionate connection." But, as he put it, "You shouldn't promise what you can't or won't deliver."

Asked whether his substantial financial contributions or his active participation on NPower's board had created more impact over the years, Walker replied without hesitation. "Participation. By miles," he said. "Active involvement on a board is all I know how to do, and what I love to do."

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### SOURCES FOR THIS PROFILE INCLUDE:

- Bridgespan interview with Jeff Walker.
- [NPower website](#)
- Thomas J. Tierney and Joel L. Fleishman, *Give Smart: Philanthropy That Gets Results*, (Public Affairs, 2011).