

# Collaborative Entrepreneurship

## How Social Entrepreneurs Can Tip the World by Working in Global Teams

The world, for 10,000 years, has been run by just a few people. This pattern is so archetypal that it is very hard for people to imagine anything different.

However, this pattern is dying. It does not work. As the rate of change accelerates, and as change comes from ever more sources, the model of a few people sitting on top of everyone else doing repetitive tasks simply cannot cope. Nonetheless, it is still pervasive, still dominant—in how we are organized and in how we think.

The new model is already here. It is a world where everyone is a changemaker, not just a tiny elite.<sup>1</sup> You can see its principles at work in the world's most successful organizations and regions—be it the Jesuits or Silicon Valley.

This new world will be a global team of teams, teams that come together in varying combinations, scales and intensities as the need requires. The faster things change, the more the world will need this giant, fast-moving kaleidoscope of teams. A team is a team only when all its members are players; and in a world defined by escalating change, they can only be players if they can contribute to change.

Social entrepreneurs are essential in this “everyone a changemaker” world. They conceive and engineer the basic new patterns. They are highly contagious role models encouraging many, many others to care and to organize. They are also mass recruiters of local changemakers—that is overwhelmingly how they spread their ideas. In their turn these local changemakers are role models and recruiters for yet more local changemakers, and a few of them will become the next generation of great entrepreneurs.

Most important, social entrepreneurs are essential if this rapidly emerging world where all the basic systems are ever in flux is not to spin off in one ill direc-

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*Bill Drayton is the founder and current CEO of Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, a citizen movement dedicated to finding and fostering social entrepreneurs worldwide. Drayton is also board chair of Get America Working!, a nonpartisan, fuller employment policy citizen group. Named by US News & World Report as one of America's 25 Best Leaders in 2005, he pioneered the concept of and coined the phrase “social entrepreneurship.”*

tion or another. Right now, for example, privacy is under sustained attack because preventative surveillance is more and more needed, the cost of connecting the dots has all but vanished, and many communications business entrepreneurs profit by accessing client information and selling it to others for a profit. Who has the interest and focused power to spot and get the overall system back on track?

It is the social entrepreneurs. The entrepreneur's job is to change the big systems. And what defines the social entrepreneur is that, to the core of their being, they are committed to serving the good of all.

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This is, however, not a role solo entrepreneurs are well placed to serve. What is needed is a team of the world's best social entrepreneurs in an issue area that has become ripe entrepre-  
neuring together.

That is the most powerful engine available to keep the world's systems moving in the right direction.

And such *collaborative entrepreneurship* is precisely what Ashoka has been working for over a decade to design and develop. A dozen such collaborations are now advancing rapidly.

How does it work?

First, the launch only comes when across the globe several hundred leading social entrepreneurs have committed their lives to causing big change in an issue area. When these top entrepreneurs (and over half the Ashoka Fellows have changed national policy within five years of their launch) move, we have the most persuasive possible open source indication that an issue area is ripe.

We then look closely at all these entrepreneurs' proven ideas, assembling the pieces together into a mosaic that allows us to see the overall picture and the most important, i.e., the most future-defining, new cross-cutting patterns.

The hardest step comes next—identifying the new paradigm that will define the field in the future. Understanding the questions the patterns seek to answer usually provides very useful clues.

Once we know where the field must go, we must identify the one or two things that must happen if the world is to make this leap.

And then we must make them in fact happen.

Which is when the full entrepreneurial force of the hundreds of top entrepreneurs collaborating together comes into full play. If we can together make those few critical things happen in seven to ten key places on the planet, we can tip the world. (They are: (1) the core five—China, Indonesia, India, Brazil, and the U.S., plus (2) German-speaking Europe, Japan, the Arab world, the Spanish speakers, and the French speakers.) This is a new, unprecedented force in the world.

Ashoka now has a dozen of these collaborative entrepreneurship thrusts in varying stages, including three in the final tipping stages.

For example, the 700 (of 3,000) Ashoka Fellows focused on children and young people have enabled us through this collaborative entrepreneurship process to recognize that a world defined by change requires people to have different skills than before—and that this means the paradigm that defines what success in growing up is must change.

Success used to be mastering knowledge and the rules (remember your report card?). This worked reasonably well in a static society. However, it no longer is enough. For example, the faster things change, less and less of a person's life can be guided by the rules: They have not been developed or are in conflict and/or are changing. Whomever has not mastered the complex, learned skill of empathy, *will* hurt others and disrupt groups—and *will* be marginalized—i.e., thrown out—regardless of the computer science or other knowledge they have.

The new paradigm focuses on the social skills a person must have to be able to contribute in an “everyone a changemaker” world: (1) every child must master empathy and (2) every teen must *be* a changemaker (practice is the only way to mastery here) using all four of the core skills—empathy/teamwork/leadership/changemaking. If a fifteen-year-old is not practicing changemaking now (e.g., by creating a tutoring service or a virtual radio station with friends), she will be at major risk when she is thirty since these skills will be all but required.

Ashoka has collaborative entrepreneurship efforts underway for both children and young people. The “Every Child Must Master Empathy” team, for example, is setting out to tip the ten key areas of the world using the jujitsu of two easily accessible levers. First, the team seeks to get a representative five percent of the *influential* schools to adopt the new paradigm. (That's 50 to 60 of the 90,000 schools in the U.S., for example). Second, it seeks to help thirty “maven” intellectual intermediaries, especially writers and publishers, to grasp the new strategic “everyone a changemaker” environment and what it requires, and then the consequent new paradigm of what success is growing up now must be. These two elements, of course, feed one another strongly. Educators who love leading and have experienced what happens when all their children master empathy at a high level, and who own their approach to doing so, will want to spread their new model and will quickly be off to see the most influential writers they know. Since such stories and enthusiasm are, of course, exactly what the writers need, there soon will be a rapidly expanding contagion of educator advocate/writer and writer/writer and schools competing interactions.

Ashoka will not commit to a collaborative entrepreneurship effort unless it sees such jujitsu leverage. No entrepreneur, not even a global team of entrepreneurs, can tip the world through his or her own force.

Even more important is the heart of collaborative entrepreneurship, active, entrepreneuring leadership by a global team of teams (one for each priority area, for example the U.S.) of many of the top social entrepreneurs in the field. They know which schools are the most influential and who to talk to and who not to

approach. They know and are respected by the key intellectual intermediaries and influencers. They have created and are ever refining the tools that work. They attract the necessary resources; they do much of the work; and they create the new solutions at each step of what has to be a journey of iterative adaptation and creativity.

The leaders of each of the component teams bring complementary innovations and skills. The North American “Every Child Must Master Empathy” team has among its leaders, for example:

- Mary Gordon (Toronto, Ontario) enables all children to grasp empathy by bringing an infant (“the professor”) and a parent to class.
- Jill Vialet (San Francisco) is bringing back recess, largely through group play, which, of course, is one of the best ways for children to practice empathy.
- Eric Dawson (Boston) is making the classroom also a place where children practice empathy all the time.
- Molly Barker (Charlotte) helps girls in fifth through eighth grades, when many lose confidence, regain it (and avoid the “mean girl” syndrome).

Another and quite different area of collaborative entrepreneurship collapses the heretofore not only separate but not communicating business and social production and distribution systems that historically have served almost every need, be it irrigation or housing, into one. Doing so ends many major market failures and dramatically profits business, the citizen sector, and the ultimate clients.

For example, in a year and a half, another global collaborative entrepreneurship team has been able to generate \$120 million in private financing and has 10,000 new homes either built or under construction for urban informal sector workers in India. The business builders and finance firms could not build for a vegetable seller’s family because they have neither paperwork (e.g., pay records) nor cross-class comfort. The citizen sector knows these informal sector workers, has low cost, and has trust—but is hopeless as a real estate developer or builder. If the citizen sector does the marketing, selecting, and servicing functions and leaves construction to business, the new hybrid system solves the previous failure of either party to deliver. India still has 24.7 million missing units; but this new model, now that it has been demonstrated and is clearly so very profitable for everyone, is spreading explosively.<sup>2</sup>

Collaborative Entrepreneurship is, we believe, well on the way to becoming the core way our field truly changes the world. Ashoka is developing the model and the initial framework. Once the pattern is established, more and more teams will spring up and probably connect through networks such as Changemakers.com.

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1. See Bill Drayton (2006), “Everyone a Changemaker: Social Entrepreneurship’s Ultimate Goal,” *Innovations* 1:1 (Winter): pp. 80-96.

2. For a full description see “A New Alliance for Global Change” in the September 2010 *Harvard Business Review*.