

Bill Drayton on the citizen sector (1,287 words)

Describe the transformation of the citizen sector that we're witnessing today.

First, it helps to look at the historical framework. Starting around 1700, the business sector went through a transformation, one that empowered anyone with an idea to start a business. This shift was so effective that, over the past three centuries, it compounded productivity in the business half of society two to three percent a year. An equal shift in the social half of the world did not happen. As a result, societies became half-stunted and backward, and relatively unproductive, while the business sector grew dramatically. The very recent citizen sector breakthrough is a direct result of this intolerable imbalance. The social entrepreneurial movement started earlier, of course, with individuals like Florence Nightingale and Maria Montessori, who were as brilliant, in a social context, as Carnegie or Rockefeller were, in business. Despite these remarkable pioneers, however, the social sector as a whole did not make the jump to the entrepreneurial/competitive architecture that had allowed business productivity to soar. Roughly two and a half decades ago, the social sector as a whole began the process of tipping from premodern to the same entrepreneurial/competitive architecture adopted by business centuries earlier. Control by a few percent was no longer cutting it in a world of ever more pervasive and rapid change. Social entrepreneurs have led this transformation. However, two decades ago we didn't even have the word "social entrepreneur"; when we started talking about it, people would go glassy-eyed, and the really smart ones would say it was an oxymoron.

What sort of character becomes a social entrepreneur?

The core psychology of a social entrepreneur is someone who cannot come to rest, in a very deep sense, until he or she has changed the pattern in an area of social concern all

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across society. Social entrepreneurs are married to a vision of, for example, a better way of helping young people grow up or of delivering global healthcare. They simply will not stop because they cannot be happy until their vision becomes the new pattern. They will persist for decades. And they are as realistic as they are visionary. As a result, they are very good listeners. They have to hear if something isn't working; and, whenever they do, they just keep changing the idea and/or the environment until their idea works. They are intensely concerned with the how-tos: How do I get from here to there? How do I solve this problem? How do these pieces fit together?

In the eyes of Ashoka, is the citizen group the same thing as the NGO?

We cringe whenever anyone uses the term NGO, or non-governmental organization – or non-profit, for that matter. You can't define a sector by what it isn't. Again, the history is interesting: the Europeans saw something new and they said, "Oh, it's a non-government organization." The Americans said saw something new that was not what they expected and called it a "nonprofit". (A brothel, for example, is usually a non-governmental organization!) So we prefer to focus in on the active ingredient, the citizen individually, or in a group, who takes the initiative in an area of public concern, be it to provide a service or introduce a needed change.

How are social entrepreneurs affecting global politics?

I believe social entrepreneurs are the cutting edge of the democratic revolution. They and the groups they lead exercise enormous power. With an idea, they change the whole system. They have no armies. They cannot force people; theirs is the power of caring and persuasion.

The organizations that all these changemakers and social entrepreneurs are building also link the individual citizen to the government, from a position of power. If you care about the environment, any aspect of the environment, you can choose one or more environmental groups that truly represent your interests. In many different ways -- the

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individual citizen, the empowerment of everyone to be a changemaker, the creation of new patterns that make the whole system work better -- social entrepreneurs are at the heart of democracy in action.

What is the global collaboration challenge that you encourage?

One, how can you solve the world's problems if we don't work together on them at the global level? There is no way that any nation can solve, say, the world's environment problems only at the national level. Not China, not the U.S., no matter how big and powerful we are. How can we build a global financial system that's safe if we don't build it at the global level? We are at a stage in the evolution of our planet that we have to think and work together.

Second, in any case, there's huge efficiency and satisfaction in our working together as a field. Worldwide, when you take all of the partial answers from individual countries and put them together, we can see what's universal. And then we can work together to spread those universal insights. Working together is many times more effective than the sum of our individual efforts.

At present, we have an antique, stuck, and client deaf financial services structure serving a new dramatically transformed citizen sector. We desperately need a new, diverse, client-oriented financial services "industry" to serve the social sector. How are we going to do get from here to there if we don't work together to encourage entrepreneurship in social investing and to encourage new people to enter the field? There is no issue that drives Ashoka's social entrepreneur members more crazy than this, which makes it front and center in our agenda.

By way of ju-jitsu leverage points!

Exactly. Every entrepreneur, business or social, succeeds because he or she knows where the jujitsu leverage point is and presses towards it with every ounce of skill and energy. Finding this magical leverage point is the heart of the matter. The most common

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jujitsu point comes from demonstrating just how attractive a new idea is and then, through deft marketing, setting off a chain reaction of others rushing to capture these advantages. The entrepreneur may have to experiment and experiment for years to find how to get to the jujitsu point, and he/she must know surely where it is. For example, Ashoka is well into the work of demonstrating that trading “hybrid business/social value-added chains” is a key step in overcoming the many stupidities caused by the several centuries of divergence between the business sense and social halves of society. By actually putting together new production and distribution chains that draw on the unique strengths of business and social institutions at different points in the production system, we can demonstrate enormous new markets and profit potential for business, very major new revenue flows for the citizen groups, and our better and better-priced products and services for everyone. Once we have demonstrated this for slum dwellers/building product companies, small farmers and piping companies, forest dwellers and forestry companies, and health care recipients and providers, the financial pages and business schools and management-consulting firms will be all over the idea. Not to mention the business and social competitors of the pioneers! It is precisely this sort of self-multiplication of an idea that is every entrepreneur’s dream.

How do budding social entrepreneurs hook up with Ashoka?

Ashoka.org. It’s all there. There are also offices in some fifty countries around the world. A career in social entrepreneurship is quite magical. It offers huge impacts, a direct fit with your values, increasing public recognition and support, no glass ceilings, and even – for the first time in centuries – salaries that are growing relative to business (as we catch up in productivity). Amidst the present soaring demand and lagging perception, the demand far outstrips the supply.