

# Bookshelf

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## **How To Change The World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas**

*By David Bornstein*

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During the Roosevelt era, the standard method of naval fire employed a very heavy set of gears and a highly trained crew, directed by a kind of coach. Although there was a gunsight, no one dared to put his eye to it because of the recoil. In *Men, Machines and Modern Times*,<sup>1</sup> the American historian Elting Morrison tells how a young naval officer developed a new method that took advantage of the inertial movement of the ship. Essentially, he simplified the gearing procedure and isolated the sight from recoil, so that it became possible for a single operator to use the sight and move the gears at the same time. Convinced that the system could increase accuracy, he wrote to Naval Headquarters, with a view to having his device officially adopted. The Navy was not interested, but, with the persistence characteristic of innovators, the officer finally persuaded the Navy to test his method. The test, as devised by the Navy, consisted of strapping the new device to a solid block in a naval yard where, deprived of the inertial movement of the ship, it failed. This proved scientifically that continuous-aim firing was not feasible. The inventor was not deterred. Finally, he reached President Roosevelt directly, who forced the device upon the Navy. Under these conditions, the Navy accepted it and achieved remarkable accuracy and efficiency gains.

What can we learn from this story? Morrison suggested that the Navy understandably tried to protect the social system of the ship from a technology that was destructive of it. The introduction of continuous-aim firing threatened a specialized, highly trained team. "Military organizations are societies built around and upon the prevailing weapons systems. Intuitively and quite correctly the military man feels that a change in weapons portends a change in the arrangements of his society."<sup>2</sup>

While this explanation of the dynamic conservatism of the system as a whole is powerful, it may not adequately account for what appears to be the non-rational character of resistance to change. After all, a reorganized naval ship remains a naval ship. Rather, the power of systems over individuals becomes understandable

only if we see that systems provide a framework of theory, values, and related technology that enables its participants to make sense of their activity. Changes in such a system are perceived – at least initially – to threaten this framework.

This equilibrium theory is certainly true of living systems. As Walter Cannon points out,

In an open system, such as our bodies represent, compounded of unstable material and subjected continually to disturbing conditions, constancy is itself evidence that agencies are acting, or ready to act, to maintain this constancy ... If a state remains steady, it does so because any tendency towards change is automatically met by increased effectiveness of the factors which resist change.<sup>3</sup>

This, too, is the challenge faced by those committed to social change. Unless they are prepared to resort to dominance or ideology (where the content of an idea becomes subordinate to the manner in which it is held and advanced), the function of entrepreneurship becomes critical. Any new social program or policy will encounter the dynamic conservatism of the social systems built around the technologies and institutions it is likely to alter or displace. There is, moreover, a rational disinclination to make significant commitments to “untried” programs. The entrepreneur must obtain commitment to a “first instance” – under the heading of experiment, pilot, demonstration, or whatever – and, in that guise, bring the concept into good currency. This involves building a constituency around it and demonstrating its connection, directly or indirectly, with the interests of those who will be powerful in decisions concerning it. All of this tends to occur within a “myth” of rational inquiry. In fact, the nature of entrepreneurship is such that inquiry often becomes after-the-fact justification.

About 25 years ago, William Drayton, then a former McKinsey consultant and Environmental Protection Agency administrator, wondered why the social sector had fallen so far behind commerce in its capacity to be entrepreneurial and competitive. He observed that business firms in Western society had become the primary vehicles for the diffusion of innovation and therefore, in a major sense, agents of social learning for society at large. Why had the social sector been unable to develop similar organizational forms and capacity in terms of their ability to effect rapid, inventive transformations in order to evolve and respond to their changing environments?

His concern about this growing gap led him to found an organization called Ashoka (named for a peace-minded third-century-BC Indian Emperor). In the intervening quarter century, Ashoka has identified and supported over 1,500 social entrepreneurs (designated as Ashoka Fellows and provided with up to three-year stipends, as well as a range of institutional support) in 53 countries (including, over the last several years, Canada and the U.S.). Applying a set of simple but rigorous criteria (Is there a new idea – what’s the impact, will it spread? Is the person creative, ethical, and entrepreneurial?), Ashoka has led the evolution of a sector to the point where today the organization is gradually

refocusing as a knowledge-management body, harvesting a deep pool of knowledge and capacity in a sector that, when Ashoka was conceived, was conspicuous for its absence.

David Bornstein spent five years researching and writing *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. It is a subject he was familiar with, having previously written an outstanding book about micro-credit in Pakistan<sup>4</sup> and having prepared a magazine article about Ashoka in 1997.

After visiting 60 Ashoka Fellows around the globe and interviewing another 40, Bornstein wisely decided that the story had to transcend the details of individual lives and impacts. As Ashoka itself is now doing, his thinking evolved to seeking a more systemic understanding of the “restless” people who propel social change. He does so, quite nimbly, by interspersing nine individual/organizational stories with chapters that reach back into history (e.g., recounting the stories of Florence Nightingale or of James Grant, the American head of UNICEF during the 1980s, who conceived and lead a world-wide campaign to make simple, low-cost health solutions available to children globally) and with thoughtful essays on the role, nature, qualities, and challenges of social entrepreneurs.

After immersing himself in the sector, Bornstein realizes that good ideas whose “time has come” are insufficient. For such ideas to take root and spread requires an obsessive individual – “a person with vision, drive, integrity of purpose, great persuasive powers and remarkable stamina.”

Bornstein recounts many examples. Roland Hill who, persuaded that the costs for delivery of mail were minor relative to the handling and administrative costs, spent two decades persuading the U.K. postal authority to move from a manual pricing system to a uniform pre-paid (the adhesive postage stamp) system for mail. The impact revolutionized postal services around the world. Likewise, John Woolman, an 18<sup>th</sup> century American Quaker who, over decades, took extended walking journeys across New Jersey, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania, persuading fellow Quakers to free their slaves and encouraging them to make slave-holding illegal in their states.

Bornstein spent time with modern-day social entrepreneurs of a similar ilk. A Hungarian mother who, unable to tolerate the institutional care her disabled son was receiving, created a network of twenty-one centres across Hungary that provide vocational training, work opportunities, and assisted living to more than 600 multiply disabled people (including her son). An Indian social work instructor who, after founding an organization to bring together children from diverse backgrounds to work on projects with tangible social benefits (e.g., building playgrounds, campaigning against smoking) created a network of help lines and emergency response systems for children in distress which extends to 30 Indian cities, fielding millions of calls and engaging thousands of organizations to provide assistance. The Harvard Divinity School graduate who has helped thousands of low-income high school graduates in a number of U.S. cities advance to successful

college careers through “College Summit,” a four-day intensive workshop that has yielded extraordinary results.

Reading these stories, one cannot help but feel exhilarated by the journey Bornstein has taken. Perhaps most gratifying is the fact that the field he guides us through is now so well developed. Drayton notes in one of his discussions with Bornstein that, for the first five years of Ashoka, there was no foundation support – none were prepared to risk funding the idea. As Drayton says, “How could they miss it?” This, of course, is the experience that many Ashoka Fellows encounter, over and over again.

Today, at least, there is ample infrastructure. Indeed, Bornstein includes a brief, but useful, “resource guide” at the end of the book for readers interested in additional resources to help them become social entrepreneurs or otherwise get involved with the sector.

With a combination of good judgment and deep commitment, Bornstein takes the reader well beyond the narrative, dramaturgic approach while, at the same time, being realistic about the difficulties in developing projective models. As he describes the circumstances in which each of the social entrepreneurs he focuses on acted, it becomes obvious that it is unlikely that the next instance will be like the first in at least certain crucial respects. Nonetheless, the book, like Ashoka, builds up a store of experience that is readily available to those who are curious. In this sense, Bornstein himself becomes a “learning agent,” synthesizing models for action and beginning to develop typologies that display patterns of relationship between characteristics of actions, situations, and successful outcomes.

As with Drayton’s initiative to launch Ashoka, Bornstein’s efforts (and those of others committed to developing our awareness and knowledge of social entrepreneurship) are timely. In spite of our current preoccupation with terrorism and other political and natural tragedies, by almost any measure the world is on the threshold of great opportunity. Levels of prosperity, democracy, and mortality are at record highs. Ubiquitous and virtually costless communication technologies are transforming traditional economic, social, and political constructs and have become powerful tools for transparency and reform. Ultimately, as Bornstein points out, it is the power of building things (instead of destroying them) and, underlying that, the conviction that problems can be solved that must be the starting point. Those who act successfully on such conviction spread it to others. Hence, as Bornstein concludes his book, “their stories must be told.” He does remarkably well!

#### NOTES

1. Elting Morrison, *Men, Machines and Modern Times* (MIT Press, 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, p.36.
3. Walter Cannon, *The Wisdom of the Body* (Norton 1963), p. 299.
4. David Bornstein, *The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).