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EVERYONE A CHANGEMAKER

Social entrepreneurship pioneer Bill Drayton's vision is to enable deep pattern changes that tackle human and environmental problems

BY GENEVIEVE CUA

BILL Drayton, widely acknowledged as the father of social entrepreneurship, was not athletic as a child nor particularly adept in mathematics.

But growing up in the 1940s in New York amid the roiling civil rights movement and civic-minded parents, he was imbued with a social consciousness and a desire to effect change far beyond his years.

He started a newspaper when he was in fifth grade, which he credits as his first social enterprise. It was initially typed on carbon paper, and later mimeographed, and its circulation grew beyond his school.

"I'm not built for contact sport, I was always the crashee which is not my idea of fun," he says of his childhood. "And I could not imagine why I was being tortured by Latin and math and all that... But I was very lucky in so many ways, my parents, principals, New York, the civil rights movement. It was really one gift after another."

Mr Drayton is the founder of Ashoka, a non-profit organisation and pioneer of social entrepreneurship. Established in 1980, Ashoka scouts for and funds early stage social entrepreneurs who are taking action in innovative ways to address social, human and environmental problems. These Ashoka Fellows are "changemakers", a term coined by Mr Drayton which is now part of common lexicon.

The Ashoka Fellow network today numbers well over 3,000 in around 93 countries. There is also a network of changemaker schools and campuses comprising more than 1,000 elementary, middle and high schools and universities. In Asia, Ashoka has backed more than 890 social entrepreneurs and there are 20 changemaker schools. Singapore Management University is a changemaker campus. Singapore-based Ashoka fellows include Jack Sim who founded the World Toilet Organization with the mission of galvanising countries around the issue of sanitation, to build scalable solutions and practices.

Social entrepreneurship, social enterprise and impact investing – these are popular themes today among the wealthy. Capgemini says millennials currently hold some US\$1 trillion in wealth, and financial return is no longer the sole factor they consider in investing. A growing number want their investments to reflect environmental, social and corporate governance factors (ESG). It is therefore not surprising that next-generation conferences hosted by private banks and attended by sons and daughters of wealth owners typically feature a session to explain how investments may do well by doing good.

Yet the popular perception of social entrepreneurship is very likely some paces removed from Mr Drayton's vision,

which is larger, more encompassing and profound than just social enterprises, or a business that seeks to do good.

Says Mr Drayton: "Social entrepreneurship starts with the word 'entrepreneur'. Its nature is a pattern change. The 'social' word means deep within the person is the commitment to the good of all, and the work has that same commitment." Hence, it is a concept that transcends the boundaries set by countries, religion, business or industry sectors.

He concedes that social enterprises are "useful" as they break down the walls between business and society. Yet without the commitment to the common good or a pattern change, social enterprises eventually fizzle out.

"It is the most powerful force in the world, a big pattern change idea but only in the hands of an entrepreneur – it's that combination that moves history. There are lots of institutions for business entrepreneurs, and frankly I'm less interested in that. But social entrepreneurs – that's really interesting. There is a moment in history for the idea and the entrepreneur when they have to leave the existing institutions. Any new pattern change idea by definition isn't going to fit in. They have to have room to test and build new institutions, and to spread it.

"If we can help people get started at that stage, costs are very low. It's essentially allowing the person to work on their dream full time for an average of three years, and weaving them together into mutual help and collaboration in a community of their peers."

Social entrepreneurs

Spotting social entrepreneurs early is essentially Ashoka's mission. There are five criteria to be selected as an Ashoka Fellow. One, candidates must have a new idea or solution or approach that will change the pattern in a field.

There must be creativity; successful social entrepreneurs are "goal setting visionaries", according to Ashoka's website. There must be the entrepreneurial quality – that is, candidates are driven by the vision of solving the problem they are working on and do not rest until their idea is the new pattern for society.

The idea must have social impact, or the potential to change the field significantly and trigger a nationwide impact. And, there must be ethical fibre. This means the social entrepreneur must be trusted if he or she is to inspire change on a wide scale.

Ashoka literature says within five years of the launch of projects by its Fellows, three quarters of the Fellows have changed national patterns in their fields, and over half have changed national policy. Over 90 per cent have had independent institutions copy their innovations.

Mr Drayton, who has been hailed as visionary and



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PHOTO: ASHOKA

lauded with numerous awards for his work, believes that great social entrepreneurs start young – in their teens. Over 80 per cent of Ashoka top social entrepreneur Fellows started their organisations before the age of 20.

The most important value to inculcate in children, he says, is “cognitive empathy”. This he sees as the first of four skills to be mastered in order for one to be a true changemaker.

The other skills are sophisticated teamwork, leadership to pull together the “team of teams”, and then changemaking itself. “The first step as a leader is that you have to be able to look at millions of moving pieces and combinations of pieces to spot a value opportunity. That envisaging is the first step of empowering your team of teams. Then you have to develop the synaptic architecture that allows that team of teams to function so each person and group helps every person and group to be the best possible changemaker. Everyone is growing in these

skills. Collectively they are able to work together to make the new value happen. It’s overwhelming and more powerful than the old model of one or two smart people who tell everyone what to do and you repeat this for the next 30 years. The power of a team is much greater but it requires a very different type of leadership.”

But how does profit fit into the model of social entrepreneurship? Mr Drayton believes the rigid division between business and society is blurring – and that is a welcome thing. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with business. This is where ‘everyone a changemaker’ revolution started.” Ashoka believes that business can be used to fight poverty. He believes it is a matter of time that Ashoka Fellows bring “big structural change” to the finance world.

“In my graduating class at Harvard there were 11 people out of 1,200 who aspired to come to this area. Now it’s the biggest group at Harvard Business School, bigger than finance.”

He counts himself blessed to have had parents who – in hindsight – supported his changemaking even though it entailed an unconventional school life. After his mother died, he discovered correspondence between his mother and his elementary school principal.

“It was very repetitive. My mother asked why is our fifth grader not in school or at home. And principal replies – you have to have confidence in your son; this is the right thing for him to do. So they made room.”

“He advised them – don’t show you’re anxious, although they were anxious.”

He believes India’s Mohandas Gandhi was among the greatest changemakers and social entrepreneurs. Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence and non-violent resistance set the stage for empathy-based ethics. “The Gandhian methodology is very respectful. It presents you with choice and tells you that we have total confidence that you’re going to make the right choice, which people do. So one terrible behaviour pattern after another has fallen – colonial regimes, the poor treatment of women and African Americans... It has been the most powerful force in the planet in the last century and remains so.”

Ashoka’s vision of changemaking has arguably become more urgent and relevant today as the yawning wealth gap across the world foments populism and a rollback of globalisation towards protectionism. “People who are afraid and angry are those pushed off the edge. It’s a cruel and destructive thing to do to a large part of humanity. That’s why Ashoka’s goal – everyone a changemaker – is so urgent.”

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