Not Everyone’s a Social Entrepreneur

You practically have to be born with a halo and wings in order to meet the currently accepted characterization of a “social entrepreneur.” By setting the bar so high, are we actually preventing the entry of a diverse set of changemakers? Gabriel Brodbar, Director of the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation Program in Social Entrepreneurship at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, offers a new framework for thinking about the roles of social changemakers.

Social entrepreneurship is allergic to definitions. Like Associate Justice Potter Stewart’s take on obscenity, many of us can’t describe social entrepreneurship, but we know it when we see it. While the popularity of social entrepreneurship as a movement continues to grow with an ever increasing number of blogs, books, magazines, university-based programs, and conferences claiming the title, the “field” seems no closer to understanding who social entrepreneurs really are and how social entrepreneurship happens than when the term first came into use in the 1960’s. A more rigorous understanding is needed if it is to fulfill its promise of being the infinitely more effective paradigm for solving some of the world’s most intractable social, economic, and environmental problems.

So what do we know? We all know that social entrepreneurs want to change the world for the better and ideally in sustainable and scalable ways. They seek to “cure” the root causes of social problems instead of masking the symptoms. They spur the disruptive innovations that ultimately lead to new and better equilibriums. But beyond that, there is little agreement.

The current debate on who is a social entrepreneur seems broadly divided into inclusive and exclusive camps. In the former, there are people like Ashoka Founder Bill Drayton, who argues there is one social entrepreneur for every ten million people (which would leave a place like Milwaukee, Wisconsin with slightly less than half of a social entrepreneur). Organizations like Echoing Green and the Draper Richards Foundation, like Ashoka, do a wonderful job seeking out these visionary individuals and supporting them as they pursue their pattern-breaking ideas. Roger Martin and Sally Osberg make a great case for this camp in their 2007 piece “Social Entrepreneurship: The Case for Definition” as has David Bornstein in How To Change the World and John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan in The Power of Unreasonable People.

In the exclusive camp are people like Greg Dees, the father of social entrepreneurship as an academic subject who has recognized that “…social entrepreneurship is essentially a team sport.” Harlem Children’s Zone founder and CEO Geoffrey Canada has pointed out that “…walking on water can not be a requirement for doing this work.” And academics like NYU Wagner Professor Paul Light have extensively argued for a definition of social entrepreneurship that recognizes a diverse set of talents and players.

Embracing this broader, more inclusive understanding of “social entrepreneur” gives more people the opportunity to be changemakers and have a role in this space. I have met thousands of graduate and undergraduate students from dozens of disciplines who want to change the world. Many of them have the passion and the vision to act on their desires, but so few really understand how to do so. Still others who may have made significant contributions to the change-making community feel that there is not a role for them in the social entrepreneurial space. Change is better left to those exceedingly rare lone-wolf social entrepreneurs who have seemingly cornered the market on the “big ideas” that have the best chance to attract the resources needed for any vision—social or otherwise—to be realized.

Truly sustainable and scalable change requires the skills and talents of not only the traditional pattern-breaking visionaries, but also of those that build and sustain the infrastructure required for the visionaries’ ideas to truly take root and flourish, and those that spur others to action through the media and the arts. And while debate will likely continue on whether we call all these people social entrepreneurs, or changemakers, or pickled herring for that matter, the work of social entrepreneurship cannot happen without the collective efforts of all these players.
Indeed, the impressive body of work that attempts to chronicle catalytic social change or entrepreneurial success regularly cites the efforts of or need for these additional types of players, but denies them the beatification afforded to the visionaries. Calling these other players social entrepreneurs simply makes the field more accessible to the multiple mission-critical players that make change happen.

The Pattern-Breaking Visionary

Pattern-breaking visionaries are the appropriately lauded individuals who most would recognize as social entrepreneurs. Teach For America founder Wendy Kopp, Ashoka Founder Bill Drayton, Grameen Bank Founder Muhammad Yunus, Barefoot College Founder Bunker Roy, and Partners in Health co-founder Paul Farmer are popular examples. More than simply seeing a hole in the social fabric and preferring death in a ditch to not fixing it (to paraphrase Little Kids Rock founder Dave Wish) these defiantly unreasonable, relentlessly optimistic, often charismatic visionaries identify previously unrecognized approaches to social challenges and have the relentless drive and plain old chutzpah to disrupt prevailing equilibriums and ultimately establish new ones. This is the “cult of personality” aspect of the field, and much attention has been rightly paid to the critical work of identifying these individuals and providing the support to help ensure their success.

Working on the frontlines, the pattern-breaking visionaries are the ones who can see opportunities that buck the prevailing wisdom, but elude others. Wendy Kopp did not try to build on existing teacher recruitment and training programs; she created a new one that tapped a previously un-mined market of talent, dramatically accelerating the pace of education reform. Muhammad Yunus didn’t try to get capital flowing to the unbanked through existing channels; he created a new one, thus building the currently sprawling microcredit marketplace. Matt Flannery of Kiva didn’t set out to improve existing philanthropic models; he instead built a new platform for direct lending to fledgling entrepreneurs the world over.

The Builders Of The Infrastructure

The second and equally important changemakers are those who build and sustain the social entrepreneurial infrastructure that’s required for these ideas to take root and flourish. Any movement or industry requires capital, legal expertise, marketing know-how, task-specific technologies, policy wonks, think-tanks, and mission-appropriate data management systems (to name just a few) that are tailored to its needs. Social entrepreneurship is no different and simply cannot happen in the absence of an infrastructure the meets the unique needs of social entrepreneurial endeavors. While organizations and companies like New Profit, B-Corp, Bridgespan, All Day Buffet, idealist.org, BBMG, the Slow Money movement and others are working in the not-for-profit, for-profit and social entrepreneurial spaces to provide aspects of the infrastructure, the field has a long away to go in creating the critical mass of intellectual, economic, political, and social capital that any industry or movement needs to survive and thrive.

Perhaps the current relative lack of such an infrastructure is a contributing factor to the apparent rarity of the pattern-breaking visionaries. There is a tremendous amount of energy, for example, spent on trying to string together the legal evaluation models and financial structures required to facilitate the unique activities of social entrepreneurial ventures. Other industries have an endless array of legal expertise and task-specific legal structures from which to draw. Finding the venture capitalists or members of the philanthropic community who can get out of the outdated silos that shun engaging hybrid operating models is a Herculean task in and of itself. Funding is certainly a challenge for any startup, but there are robust communities in the venture capital and foundation world that help to spur traditional for and not-for-profit activity, but far less for the social entrepreneurial community. Additionally, finding reliable, tested, and accepted evaluation models that accurately measure the environmental, social, and economic impact of social entrepreneurial endeavors is difficult at best; whereas traditional for-profit endeavors can rely on ROI calculations, the multiple-bottom line movement has yet to deliver the needed metrics. Strong consulting and lobbying firms, and other forms of political capital, a robust understanding of best practices, and an extensive collection of publications that catalog and make available these types of resources are just some of the additional fundamental elements that would constitute a real social entrepreneurial infrastructure.

Of course, it is difficult to cite examples of famous infrastruc-
ture social entrepreneurs because there really aren’t any. What is important, however, is that these individuals aren’t simply the workers that implement the vision of the pattern-breaking social entrepreneur. We are not simply talking about employees focused on social entrepreneurial missions. Instead, these social entrepreneurs build the framework without which the social entrepreneurial visions cannot happen, or whose execution would at least be severely hampered.

Silicon Valley “happened” in Silicon Valley in part because of the legal and venture capital communities and cultures that were in place. They were receptive and open and nimble enough to help develop and evolve the ideas of the dotcom visionaries, certainly more so than their counterparts back east. Imagine the possibilities if those with pattern-breaking ideas to realize social missions could rely on such a community. We simply cannot expect them to continue trying to operate in a vacuum.

Spurring Others To Action Through Media And The Arts

The third type of social entrepreneurs are those who spur others to action through media and the arts. This is not simply a matter of visionaries hiring public relations managers. A true movement requires more than marketing. Paul Light rightly points out that the prevailing equilibrium in a given arena is prevailing in part because of the efforts of entrenched interests. The current health care debate provides a great example. He goes on to argue that changing the equilibrium requires replacing the dominant force that maintains it. This is accomplished in part by creating movements that question the values buttressing the equilibrium. For a public option in health care to be realized, for example, the public must value health care as a right and not as a privilege.

Documentary film makers, photographers, journalists, painters, authors, talking heads, publishers, playwrights, etc., can often create the opening in the equilibrium needed for a movement to gain a foothold; to create a space for the “hives of activity” that result in system change. The role journalism and imagery played in ending America’s involvement in Vietnam and the role Motown played in the civil rights movement are two obvious examples. Solving today’s social and environmental problems require the same force of movement—movements that require numbers that share a recognized point of view and belief system. Social entrepreneurs working in the arts and media can help make that happen.

By embracing these three unique, and in large respects, equally important changemaking roles, we can take the field of social entrepreneurship to the next level. With a broader understanding of the kind of people social entrepreneurship demands, we can better define who we are and where we are going, and do a considerably better job attracting and supporting the multiple players needed to truly realize large scale sustainable social change.

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1 Associate Justice Potter Stewart served on the United States Supreme Court, where he made major contributions to criminal justice reform, civil rights, access to the courts, and Fourth Amendment jurisprudence, among other areas. Stewart is best known for his statement involving the obscenity case Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964), in which he wrote that “hard-core pornography” was hard to define, but that “I know it when I see it.”
8 A large debt of gratitude is owed to Professor Paul Light, who drew on his extensive research to provide much insight for the development of the philosophical underpinnings on the NYU Reynolds Program. His most recent work, The Search for Social Entrepreneurship, explores the state of knowledge of the field and makes suggestions for future research. Dean Ellen Shall of NYU Wagner also provided critical thinking in the design and execution of the program.
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