

Nature vs. Nurture

Are Social Entrepreneurs Born or Made?

By Wayne Visser

What do Taddy Blecher, Anurag Gupta, Wang Chuan-Fu and all of the other social entrepreneurs have in common? Is this a special breed of human being? Are social entrepreneurs born or can they be made? In the academic literature, there is an interesting thread of research that is around the concept of 'champions' in organisations, especially 'environmental champions'. The idea draws on prior conceptions of the human resources champion in the 1970s and 1980s, before HR became institutionalised.

Academics define environmental champions as people who can attractively express a personal vision about environmental protection that is in tune with both industry's needs and wider public concern and who convince and enable organisation members to turn environmental issues into successful corporate programs and innovations. Environmental champions have been showed to imbue a combination of characteristics, including being a catalyst, champion, sponsor, facilitator and demonstrator. Their skills include the ability to identify, package and sell environmental issues within their organisations. Their effectiveness in engaging others rests heavily on expertise, top management support and a strong appreciation for the problems that every business unit or operations manager faces.

Research on champions is not confined purely to the environmental dimension of sustainability. Others have written about socially responsible change-agents, as well as managers' individual discretion as a component of corporate social performance. British academic Christine Hemingway, for example, finds that CSR can be the result of championing by a few managers, based on their personal values and beliefs, despite the personal and professional risks this may entail. Individual managers are also often mediators in corporate philanthropy and stakeholder influence. Hence, the notion of CSR champions has emerged as an important concept, which I will return to this in the final blog on individual change agents.

Bill Drayton, who has been involved in selecting and tracking the progress of the 2,700 Ashoka Fellows, believes social entrepreneurs 'focus everyday on the "how to" questions. How are they going to get from here to their ultimate goal? How are they going to deal with this opportunity or that barrier? How are the pieces going to fit together? They are engineers, not poets. ... The entrepreneur's job is not to take an idea and then implement it. That is what franchisees do. The entrepreneur is building something that is entirely new – by constantly creating and testing and recreating and then testing and recreating again.'

There are other characteristics as well, according to Drayton. 'The true social entrepreneur also has an almost magical ability to move people, a power rooted in exceptional ethical fibre. He or she is always asking people to do things that are unreasonable – and people do them. ... The entrepreneur has an inner confidence that most sense but do not understand. While others think entrepreneurs are taking risks, entrepreneurs don't see it that way because they have thought things through extremely well. They also believe in their ability continuously to adapt the idea as they drive toward a goal that they know is a huge win for everyone, and ultimately to reach that goal. They know, in other words, that they have the gift that brings the greatest happiness in the world, the gift of being able to give at the highest level. Once one grasps who the true social entrepreneur is,' concludes Drayton, 'one would have to be crazed to bet against him or her ultimately changing the world at large scale.'

The question remains: Is such social entrepreneurship a random and unpredictable phenomenon, or is there some underlying rationale or theory that we can use to better understand and advance

sustainability innovation? I did a research project with my colleagues at Cambridge University to answer this question.ii In our attempt to 'map the territory', we created a model that looked at the Enablers, Processes and Agents of sustainability innovation. There were a number of interesting findings.

First, of the four Enablers of innovation that we identified – government, finance, technology and culture – most people are focused either on finance or technology. For example, in the SustainAbility survey of over 100 social entrepreneurs, 72% cited 'access to finance' as their primary challenge, and much of the report is dedicated to understanding this issue.iii Furthermore, many typical cases held up as innovation success stories – whether they be GE's EcoImagination programme or Vodafone's M-Pesa service – are almost inevitably technology solutions.

The corollary of this finding is that the role of government and culture is being neglected. Government, by setting clear, long term policy targets on social and environmental issues like biodiversity, climate change or access to health and sanitation, can create an enabling environment that allows business to innovate. Likewise, fostering a corporate and national culture of innovation – of opportunity orientation rather than risk obsession – is a necessary precondition for innovation.

In the area of Processes, of which we identified three – individual actions, management systems and tailored approaches – most of the focus has been on individual actions. This mirrored our findings for Agents, where individuals were favoured over companies and non-business agents. Hence, the notion of a sustainability champion or a social entrepreneur trains our hopes on the creative, business-savvy individual. This overlooks the important role of innovation within large companies – what the second in the SustainAbility series of reports called 'intrapreneurship' – as well as the potential for NGOs like Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) to be part of the innovative solution.

Another interesting finding from my Cambridge research was that most cited cases seem to be innovation processes specifically targeting sustainability issues, rather than efforts at embedding sustainability principles in core innovation processes. This is a fundamental distinction, because it means that most R&D going on in companies – and hence most innovation – is not systematically building in social and environmental criteria. As a result, much like CSR more generally, innovation is a peripheral, project/product specific activity, which is exactly what is preventing scalable solutions from emerging in the mainstream economy. Until CSR is built into every organisational process – and especially into strategic functions like R&D or new product development – we will always be playing on the fringes of the Age of Responsibility.

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ⁱ Drayton, B. (2010). Tipping the world: The power of collaborative entrepreneurship. Published on the McKinsey What Matters site, 8 April 2010.

ⁱⁱ Blowfield, M., Visser, W. & Livesey, F. (2007). Sustainability Innovation: Mapping the Territory, University Cambridge Programme for Industry Research Paper Series: No. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Growing Opportunity: Entrepreneurial Solutions to Insoluble Problems (2007)