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Everyone a Changemaker

David Brooks FEB. 8, 2018

Bill Drayton invented the term “social entrepreneur” and founded Ashoka, the organization that supports 3,500 of them in 93 countries. He’s a legend in the nonprofit world, so I went to him this week to see if he could offer some clarity and hope in discouraging times. He did not disappoint.

Drayton believes we’re in the middle of a necessary but painful historical transition. For millenniums most people’s lives had a certain pattern. You went to school to learn a trade or a skill — baking, farming or accounting. Then you could go into the work force and make a good living repeating the same skill over the course of your career.

But these days machines can do pretty much anything that’s repetitive. The new world requires a different sort of person. Drayton calls this new sort of person a changemaker.

Changemakers are people who can see the patterns around them, identify the problems in any situation, figure out ways to solve the problem, organize fluid teams, lead collective action and then continually adapt as situations change.

For example, Ashoka fellow Andrés Gallardo is a Mexican who lived in a high crime neighborhood. He created an app, called Haus, that allows people to network with their neighbors. The app has a panic button that alerts everybody in the

neighborhood when a crime is happening. It allows neighbors to organize, chat, share crime statistics and work together.

To form and lead this community of communities, Gallardo had to possess what Drayton calls “cognitive empathy-based living for the good of all.” Cognitive empathy is the ability to perceive how people are feeling in evolving circumstances. “For the good of all” is the capacity to build teams.

It doesn't matter if you are working in the cafeteria or the inspection line of a plant, companies will now only hire people who can see problems and organize responses.

Millions of people already live with this mind-set. But a lot of people still inhabit the world of following rules and repetitive skills. They hear society telling them: “We don't need you. We don't need your kids, either.” Of course, those people go into reactionary mode and strike back.

The central challenge of our time, Drayton says, is to make everyone a changemaker. To do that you start young. Your kid is 12. She tells you about some problem — the other kids at school are systematically mean to special-needs students. This is a big moment. You pause what you are doing and ask her if there's anything she thinks she can do to solve the problem, not just for this kid but for the next time it happens, too.

Very few kids take action to solve the first problem they see, but eventually they come back having conceived and owning an idea. They organize their friends and do something. The adult job now is to get out of the way. Put the kids in charge.

Once a kid has had an idea, built a team and changed her world, she's a changemaker. She has the power. She'll go on to organize more teams. She will always be needed.

Drayton asks parents: “Does your daughter know that she is a changemaker? Is she practicing changemaking?” He tells them: “If you can't answer ‘yes’ to these

questions, you have urgent work to do.”

In an earlier era, he says, society realized it needed universal literacy. Today, schools have to develop the curriculums and assessments to make the changemaking mentality universal. They have to understand this is their criteria for success.

Ashoka has studied social movements to find out how this kind of mental shift can be promoted. It turns out that successful movements take similar steps.

First, they gather a group of powerful and hungry co-leading organizations. (Ashoka is working with Arizona State and George Mason University.) Second, the group is opened to everybody. (You never know who is going to come up with the crucial idea.) Third, the movement creates soap operas with daily episodes. (The civil rights movement created televised dramas with good guys and bad guys, like the march from Selma.)

I wonder if everybody wants to be a changemaker in the Drayton mold. I wonder about any social vision that isn't fundamentally political. You can have a nation filled with local changemakers, but if the government is rotten their work comes to little. The social sector has never fully grappled with the permanent presence of sin.

But Drayton's genius is his capacity to identify new social categories. Since he invented the social entrepreneur category 36 years ago, hundreds of thousands of people have said, “Yes, that's what I want to be.” The changemaker is an expansion of that social type.

Social transformation flows from personal transformation. You change the world when you hold up a new and more attractive way to live. And Drayton wants to make universal a quality many people don't even see: agency.

Millions of people don't feel that they can take control of their own lives. If we could give everyone the chance to experience an agency moment, to express love and respect in action, the ramifications really would change the world.