

How to Solve the
World's Toughest Problems

A vertical leaf with a red band across the middle. The leaf is divided into five horizontal sections by white strips. From top to bottom, the sections are green, yellow, red, orange, and grey. The red section is the largest and is positioned behind the text 'SOCIAL'.

DRIVING SOCIAL CHANGE

PAUL C. LIGHT

Foreword by CATHERINE B. REYNOLDS
Chairman of the Board, Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation

Driving Social Change

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To Ernie, who took me across the finish line

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Foreword

Simply defined, social entrepreneurship creates new combinations of ideas that spur solutions to great problems. It is an essential path to doing well and doing good at the same time.

It is also a time-honored form of leadership. Social entrepreneurs do not spend their time telling others what to do. They pick up the reins. They keep the plates spinning toward achieving an impact. They have the drive to tackle social issues through all means possible. Social entrepreneurs are not cynics. They believe they can change the world.

Social entrepreneurs are not wed to any particular method, however. They do whatever is necessary to make a difference for the public good and they operate across society. Some work in nonprofit agencies, others in government, and still others in private firms.

Wherever they work, social entrepreneurs must have the business savvy, financial skills, and innovative passion to disrupt the status quo of our social problems and thereby create large-scale change. There is always something to disrupt, but not always the strategy needed for the long drive for success.

At the heart of every breakthrough is an outside-the-box visionary who had a passion for making a difference. It is true in science, the arts, education, and business—and it is true in solving social problems.

Think of the business entrepreneurs who changed the United States. Henry Ford did it with the Model T, a car for the masses. George Eastman did it with photography. A. P. Giannini did it with his branch banking idea for all citizens, rich or poor, and modern banking was the result. And a young professor of molecular biology named Herbert Boyer endured academic scorn by going into business to produce synthetic hormones and launch an ongoing biotech revolution.

Why can't the same out-of-the-box approach be used for social problems?

What if we found people with the same drive and courage as Herb Boyer to address widespread social ills?

Paul C. Light has important answers to these questions. Like me, he believes in the power of the individual to make a difference. Like me, he believes in the power of innovation to make a difference. And, like me, he believes that social change is not only possible, but essential for addressing the great problems that surround us.

Let me highlight three change agents, true social entrepreneurs who embody this potent combination.

A social entrepreneur from Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, won the Nobel Peace Prize for creating and expanding his trailblazing use of small loans, or microcredit, to bring about social change. Loans as low as \$9 have helped beggars start small businesses and poor women buy basket-weaving materials.

As the Nobel Committee said in its citation, "Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find

ways in which to break out of poverty. Microcredit is one such means.”

The founder of the American Association of Retired Persons (now AARP), Ethel Percy Andrus, was an equally important but less visible social entrepreneur. She saw the need to bring older persons out of their isolation and back into the mainstream of American life and created AARP to achieve her goal. Today, AARP has 40 million members who receive a variety of benefits that have improved the quality of their lives and the economic vitality of the United States. Andrus gave voice to the needs and opportunities of millions of older Americans.

My friend Wendy Kopp, for her senior thesis as an undergraduate at Princeton University, envisioned a movement that would fill the empty classrooms in the nation’s most needy schools. She turned her thesis into the organization Teach for America, which now places more than 7,000 corps members in classrooms across the nation. Over the past 20 years, Teach for America alumni have reached approximately three million students. In doing so, she touched a nerve with college students who want to make a difference in American education.

Why did the world get so excited when Warren Buffett said he was going to give \$31 billion of his stock to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation? I have thought about that a good deal. The excitement was not just about the money—after all, government has much more money than either Buffett or Gates.

Rather, it was about new ways to meet old social problems. It was also about supporting new ideas for tackling large problems. And it was about creating and expanding big ideas.

Let me tell you about the nature of social entrepreneurs by relating a story about the behavior of birds.

There was an article a number of years ago in the *Harvard Business Review* that had to do with successful companies. One interesting analogy the author used regarded the behavior of two species of birds, brown titmice and red robins, in Great Britain.

In the late 1800s, milkmen left open bottles of milk on people's doorsteps. The rich cream would rise to the top, and the titmice and robins would consume the cream.

In the 1930s, after the birds had been enjoying the cream for about 50 years, the British began to put aluminum seals on the bottles. By the early 1950s, the entire population of an estimated one million titmice had learned to pierce the seals. The robins never acquired that skill.

Now why is that? The answer is that robins are territorial. There is a great deal of communication among them but it is usually of the "keep out of my territory" variety. The titmice, in contrast, like to flock. And birds that flock learn faster.

Social entrepreneurs are like titmice. Yes, entrepreneurs are independent birds, but they do flock—they flock toward new ideas and others of their kind who have new ideas.

They share. They compare. They experiment. They try this. They try that. They cock their heads and look at the seal until they figure out how to break it and get the cream.

Light's new book shows us how social entrepreneurs and other change agents can use the same kind of creative collaboration to achieve social change. Like social entrepreneurs, he is not wed to any one path to having an impact.

He believes that change can come from the kind of visible heroes my foundation supports through the Academy of Achievement, from pathbreaking institutions such as Teach for America, from teams of talented individuals who work

together toward sustaining and protecting social breakthroughs, and from collections of change agents who form networks for sharing ideas and promoting impact. And perhaps most important, he believes that power is an essential resource in creating change.

His book offers a number of important insights for creating future breakthroughs toward economic, social, and political progress. He rightly argues that our fundamental purpose must be to change the world. Social entrepreneurship has never been about personal glory, though glory sometimes follows. It is about the tough work of change.

Light also rightly argues that there are many partners in successful change. There is almost always a visible figure at the front of the march, but there must be others walking side by side. Change rarely occurs through the simple power of a good idea—it requires hard work by many people who share the same goal. The path to change must follow the ultimate goal, not vice versa.

Finally, Light argues that we must learn more about how to make the best use of our change agents. They face many obstacles on the path to success. As I have learned firsthand, the status quo often uses every means possible, including the aggressive use of power, to resist change. That is how it remains the status quo.

Light's book offers other insights about how change occurs, including the need for constant vigilance regarding past achievements such as women's rights, environmental protection, and reducing disease. We must simultaneously push forward with new solutions to old problems, while protecting past breakthroughs that continue to produce progress. As Light argues, this is not an either-or world. We must alter the future even as we celebrate the past.

I commend Light's book to anyone dedicated to social change. His questions deserve answers, his insights demand attention, and his faith in the possible will resonate with the future leaders who are already taking the reins of power needed for solving the world's toughest problems.

Catherine B. Reynolds
Chairman of the Board
Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation
July 31, 2010

Acknowledgments

This book is the inaugural contribution of my New York University Center for Global Public Service and Social Change. The center is jointly sponsored by New York University and the government of the United Arab Emirates. Its mission is to promote public service and social change across the globe, and it will draw upon research, case studies, and networks to advance efforts to address the world's toughest problems, which are often called *urgent threats*.

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Introduction

The world faces an onslaught of urgent threats. Poverty continues to corrode hope and opportunity, disease threatens lives and well-being, intolerance marginalizes hundreds of millions and fuels genocide, political instability and corruption produce failed states and genocide, global warming continues its onward march toward environmental devastation, the global recession maintains a tight grip on inequality, and the world remains vulnerable to a host of known and yet-to-be-known catastrophes.

These threats are urgent if only because the world has little time to act before reaching tipping points that will create decades, if not centuries, of havoc. They threaten the very fabric of the world's social, economic, and political systems, and almost certainly guarantee a declining quality of life for every citizen. They must be tackled soon.

The cover of this book makes this point perfectly. The leaves of social breakthroughs are part of the trees of new and still-vibrant breakthroughs alike, and the trees are part of the forest of change. Every leaf is nurtured by the forest as a whole, and is linked in some way to the broader effort to move

from the darkness of winter through the many colors leading to a vibrant spring. The challenge is to reach the green and hold it, in part by supporting the forest as a whole.

This book is based on the notion that intractable problems can be solved if agents of change have the purpose and perseverance to confront the status quo. The path to a more just, tolerant, and equitable world is never easy, but its twists and turns can be marked and informed.

Drawing upon my own research and new insights from recent studies, the book asks three sets of questions.

- First, are we relying too heavily on lone wolves to produce social entrepreneurship and change? How do we end the definitional debate about what does and does not constitute change? And what is the entrepreneur's role in protecting past breakthroughs? Simply asked, are we overselling social entrepreneurship as the primary, or even only, driver of social breakthroughs?
- Second, what are other drivers that can be used for social change? How do they work? What is their role in pushing through the key stages of impact? And where do they fit in the breakthrough cycle? Simply asked, have we neglected other actors in both challenging the prevailing wisdom, addressing urgent threats, and honoring the promises we make?
- Third, how do breakthroughs actually occur? What are the key steps in creating momentum toward disruption, breakthrough, and durable social change? What are the most promising targets for further research and investment? And what are the essential characteristics of robust movement through the breakthrough cycle? Simply asked, how can collaboration advance success?

Although each chapter stands separately, they all relate to the breakthrough cycle discussed in Chapter 3. Social entrepreneurship is a critically important part of the agitation needed for change, as are social safekeeping, exploring, and advocating. So is the infrastructure of change that supports social breakthrough. Viewed as a whole, this book focuses on the overall pieces that must come together to solve the world's toughest problems.

Along the way, the book focuses on the need to protect past social breakthroughs from complacency and counterattack. Unlike business breakthroughs that sweep away entire industries with a single product, social breakthroughs rarely destroy the industries of deprivation that profit from human suffering. These industries not only survive most breakthroughs; they sometimes return to power in the very next election or war.

Defining Breakthrough

Social breakthrough is a nearly perfect term for describing the ultimate output of social action. When successful, social breakthrough pushes a fundamental change in the prevailing wisdom about who gets what, when, where, and how from a society. Social breakthrough occurs when the demand for an end to deprivation, marginalization, and inequality finally overwhelms the resistance. Some breakthroughs involve the faithful execution of new laws and treaties, others create measurable changes in public behavior, and still others actually dismantle a whole industry of deprivation by restoring human rights and liberties.

However, social breakthrough is not a synonym for social entrepreneurship or innovation. Rather, it is the destination of all social action, and involves a cycle of engagement that can

act as a map for deploying resources and energy. Although a breakthrough can come from the new combinations of ideas that underpin innovation (social entrepreneurship), it can also come from the aggressive defense, delivery, and expansion of past breakthroughs (social safekeeping), careful research on trends and solutions (social exploring), and the unrelenting demand for change embedded in social networks (social advocacy). The choice of one driver over another depends entirely on the problem to be solved, not the popularity of a particular approach. The urgent threat comes first, while the choice of a particular driver for achieving impact comes second. Form follows function, path follows purpose, and driver follows destination, not vice versa.

As such, we must search for change through all means possible, whether beneath the lamppost that illuminates individual heroes or just beyond the light among those who aggregate the pressure for change. If our purpose is to change the world, we must concentrate on every driver possible, not just the ones we can see.

A Sheldonian Moment

Ironically perhaps, I came to this conclusion after attending the three-day 2009 Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship, which took place in Oxford, England. It was a remarkable event—intense, inspiring, and engaging. All the people I admire were there—Bill Drayton, Pamela Hartigan, Darell Hammond, Victoria Hale, Sally Osberg, Larry Brilliant, and even Jeff Skoll himself. I attended the forum ready to embrace social entrepreneurship as the key driver of social breakthrough and did everything I could to make the conversion. But the event convinced me otherwise.

On the one hand, the forum offered plenty of inspiration through stories and films about the heroes who work so hard to achieve social breakthroughs. The forum also featured grants to a host of social entrepreneurs, such as Bart Weetjans of Apopo, Nader Khateeb and Gidon Bromberg from EcoPeace, Martin von Hildebrand from Foudación Gaia Amazonas, Nina Smith from GoodWeave (formerly known as Rugmart International), and Jordan Kassalow from VisionSpring (formerly known as Scojo).

On the other hand, the forum was unsettling. Perhaps it was just the contrarian in me. Or perhaps it was Jeff Skoll's speech about the state of the world. The more Skoll talked about the urgent threats facing the world, the more I wanted to be anywhere but in the historic Sheldonian Theatre where he spoke. So much money and celebration for so many wonderful start-ups—but so many frightening problems and so much deep uncertainty about the future.

The two themes are now coming together, in part because Skoll and other funders are focusing more closely on collaboration. As the Skoll Foundation argued in announcing its 2010 world forum, heroes will always be an essential source of new combinations of ideas, but *catalytic collaboration* is the key to eventual impact:

More and more social entrepreneurship is not only about the power of the brilliant individual; increasingly it's about the power of partnerships, the coalitions that take the solutions you envision and bring the impact of those solutions to scale, not necessarily one organization to scale, the impact of the solution to scale. This is the direction we are headed, toward a dynamic open-source model of social breakthrough.