

ORLANDO FLORIN / ISTO

Essay

Creating a tipping point for social intrapreneurism

By David Grayson, Melody McLaren, Heiko Spitzack

There is an opportunity for a multistakeholder approach that can promote better sustainable business practices through social intrapreneurism

In a recent Ethical Corporation essay – A view from the crossroads, published in October 2013 – David Grayson highlighted the need for “much more transnational, cross-sector collaboration if we are to tackle the urgent sustainability challenges which now loom, Everest-like, before us”.

To achieve this goal will require engaging the creative powers of people in business, as well as the public and not-for-profit sectors, on a large scale in order to create a “tipping point” – described by Malcolm Gladwell in his best-selling book of the same name¹ – for widespread action to address social and environmental goals. Gladwell argues that ideas spread through the existence of specific “types” who “tip” human behaviour in particular ways – sales people, connectors (brokers) and mavens (individuals able to see meaning, patterns and the big picture from seemingly random information).

Business leaders interested in helping sustainability practices reach a “tipping point” would do well to tap the talents of such individual types in their organisations and the extended cross-sector networks through which they operate.

Intrapreneur opportunity

Beyond simply increasing the number of people in their companies engaged with sustainability issues, business leaders may wish to improve the quality of that engagement as well. Those who want to move beyond compliance or risk-mitigation in managing their social, environmental and economic impacts (corporate responsibility) and also systemically find business opportunities (corporate sustainability)

need to engage the full range of their employees’ talents.

Almost certainly, among these employees will be a small number who will have entrepreneurial ideas that will simultaneously add value to the company and contribute to sustainable development; and who will be prepared to take the initiative – often in their own time. We call these people social intrapreneurs: people within a large corporation who take the initiative for innovations that address social or environmental challenges while creating commercial value for the company.

They are looking to create what Harvard strategy guru Michael Porter describes as “shared value”. Typically, social intrapreneurs are going against the grain. They are challenging their organisation, questioning the status quo to develop and implement commercially attractive sustainability solutions. Hence another description: corporate provocateurs. Often, at least initially, their intrapreneurial activity is not part of their job. This is why some social intrapreneurs talk of their day job and the job that they do in their spare time: “moonlighting” for their own employer.

Social intrapreneurs are responsible for, among other things, the creation of microinsurance products (Allianz); the start-up of a business unit within a global parcel delivery corporation to improve operational efficiency while ameliorating climate change impacts (DHL); the reduction of an international brewing company’s production costs to improve competitiveness in developing countries through partnerships with local growers (SAB

Social intrapreneurs challenge their organisations, challenge the status quo to develop commercially attractive sustainable solutions

If we want to scale good ideas quickly, promoting social intrapreneurism makes sense



Could social intrapreneurs build on the work of entrepreneurs such as Muhammad Yunus?

Miller); micro-energy projects within a major energy generation corporation to boost productivity and address poverty in developing countries (EON); ethically produced sustainable product lines at a landscape paving company (Marshalls); and the development of a commercially viable business unit within an engineering consultancy to address sustainable development (Arup). All these projects exemplify “corporate social opportunities” – corporate initiatives that create both commercial and societal benefit (Grayson and Hodges, 2004)².

Over the past two decades, social entrepreneurs such as Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen bank have been heralded for creating social benefits based on business thinking. During this time an international architecture to raise awareness of, and support for, social entrepreneurs and social enterprise has emerged, thanks to the pioneering work of a number of individuals and organisations.

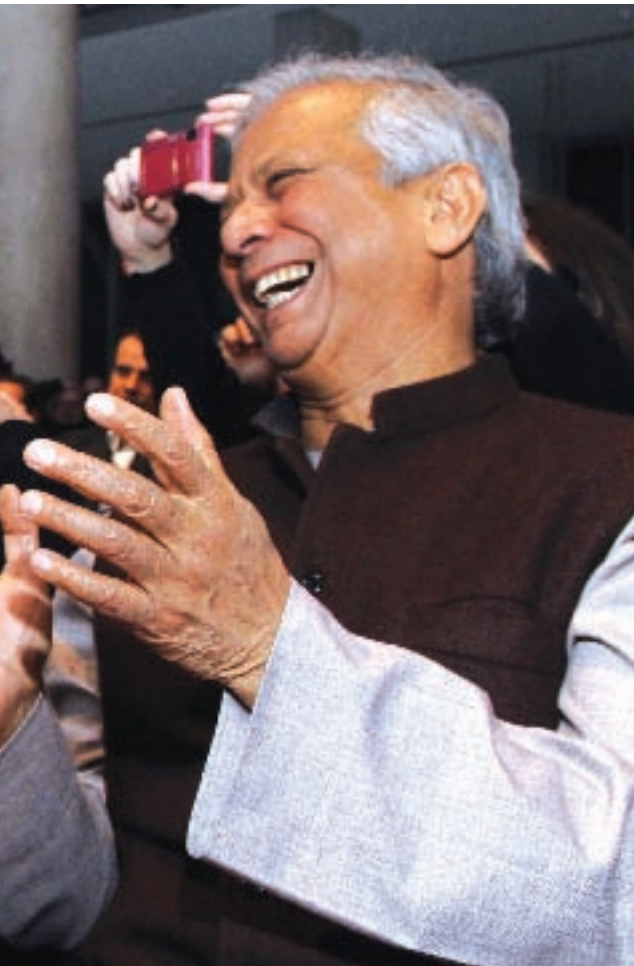
Prominent among these have been Bill Drayton and the Ashoka Foundation he created; the Avina Foundation; Klaus Schwab, founder of the Davos World Economic Forum, through whose Schwab Foundation social enterprise has featured at the WEF; Jeff Skoll and the Skoll Foundation, which in

turn has created the Skoll Centre for Social Enterprise at Oxford’s Said Business School, and the annual Skoll World Forum on Social Enterprise; and John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan, with their book *The Power of Unreasonable People* (2008).

It has taken more than two decades for social entrepreneurship to be widely recognised. It took Yunus’s Grameen Bank more than 20 years to reach seven million customers. Compare that to M-Pesa, a mobile payment system launched by two social intrapreneurs at Vodafone in Kenya, which reached 17 million people within the first four years. If we want to scale good ideas quickly, promoting social intrapreneurism makes sense. Is it possible for the socialisation of the idea of, and development of good practice in, social intrapreneurism to be accelerated?

Sales force

One of the factors driving increased awareness of social entrepreneurship was the interest of the Schwab Foundation and discussion of the topic at the World Economic Forum. Already, social intrapreneurism has been discussed in Davos in 2013 and in the WEF China 2013 meeting. Undoubt-



edly, regular further discussion in such forums, where many of the global elite and global opinion-formers – an ideal “sales force” for promoting a “shared value” ethos – meet to share and develop ideas, would help to speed up awareness-raising as participants and journalists covering the event spread the messages they have heard. This is starting to happen with regular coverage in blogs and media such as Guardian Sustainable Business, Fast Company, Forbes and the Huffington Post.

A few individual consultancies and corporate responsibility coalitions are starting to help companies to explore how to create an enabling environment. This process could be accelerated if a group of leading multinational companies could be persuaded to commit publicly to social intrapreneurism, and to a joint action-learning programme where they would share their experiences and challenges and explore potential solutions for creating an enabling environment for social intrapreneurism in their own organisations.

Such an action-learning research club would carry greater credibility and profile if it were coordinated by a high-profile organisation such as the WEF; one of the leading corporate responsibility

coalitions such as Business for Social Responsibility or the World Business Council for Sustainable Development; leading business schools; or a global consultancy.

Ideally, such collaboration would optimise the latest online information and communications technology to facilitate the capture, storage and retrieval of good practice; and the emerging learning would be made publicly available via the internet and subsequently through capacity-building training programmes for corporate heads of learning, talent development, innovation, HR, strategy, new business development and others. Already CSR Europe has teamed up with Ashoka and the BMW Foundation to raise awareness of, and capacity for supporting, social intrapreneurism among their corporate members and national CR coalition partners.

‘Connector’ events and networks

Connecting innovative companies and individuals committed to cultivating, supporting and promoting social intrapreneurism through networks and coalitions can play a powerful role in creating a “tipping point” for social intrapreneurism.

Ideally, in parallel with this awareness-raising and capacity-building for companies, there would be increased promotion to potential social intrapreneurs themselves. This could be through further competitions and award schemes like the League of Intrapreneurs.

There are now about 50 Impact Hubs with a further 50 expected to be operational by 2015. More Impact Hubs around the world could be running courses and clubs for social intrapreneurs. Student organisations such as Aiesec, Oikos International and Net Impact, and student-run conferences such as Emerge (hosted at Said Business School, Oxford) and the annual Doing Good and Doing Well Conference on responsible business at IESE (Barcelona) could be profiling social intrapreneurs regularly.

Net Impact and Oikos International are global student networks aiming to bring sustainability into management education. Aiesec also has some interest groups on sustainability. Their alumni are a natural source of social intrapreneurs as their members are convinced that business can be used as a positive force for good, and many of them are looking for careers with positive impact. At their universities they have already learned change-making skills in trying to convince university administration to integrate sustainability into the courses they offer.

Net Impact has several professional chapters for alumni. It is possible some of these individuals may be aspiring or emergent social intrapreneurs. Apart from encouraging them, Net Impact might profile such members to inspire others.

By making social intrapreneurism a regular theme of their conferences, publications and activi-

A few consultancies and coalitions are helping companies create an enabling environment

The world's business schools could be including courses on social intrapreneurism

ties, student organisations such as Oikos International and Net Impact could further raise awareness of the idea of social intrapreneurism, build networks and potentially create learning collateral that local chapters could use. Members could also be suggesting social intrapreneurism as a topic for classes, to their faculty. The world's business schools could be including courses on social intrapreneurism in their MBA and specialist masters programmes, as well as in specialist executive leadership programmes.

Supporting individuals

Being a social intrapreneur, especially in the early stages, can be very lonely. Capturing and disseminating more practical advice and tips like the League of Intrapreneurs Cubicle Warrior Toolkit, and creating more peer-to-peer learning and support networks like the League of Intrapreneurs Lab and Aspen Institute's First Movers programme, and sharing curriculum and case-studies online, could also accelerate adoption of social intrapreneurism.

Many of the social intrapreneurs and their projects we have met have teamed up with external partners such as NGOs that have been crucial to their success. For these external partners, social intrapreneurs can be another route to increase their own impact substantially and to extend their reach.

Gib Bulloch – a leading social intrapreneur who founded Accenture Development Partnerships writes: *Most large charities or NGOs will have tens if not hundreds of thousands of supporters each giving \$10, \$20, \$50 or more each month as part of their commitment to a cause they are passionate about. Some will work in the public sector, some in the non-profit sector. But many will work in the corporate sector. And of them, a handful may even be latent social intrapreneurs – people who are well networked internally. Who know the rules of the corporate and when to bend or even break them. They know that influence doesn't always mean you've memorised the hierarchy of an organisation chart. They know how to cut corners to get things done and are willing to take career risks for a cause they are passionate about. The smart NGO CEO will consider less about chasing philanthropic dollars – more about how to mine their donor database for the latent social intrapreneurs – the herds of latent "Trojan horses" residing deep undercover in the corporate world, awaiting a cause and a call to action.*³

Imagine a group of innovative social enterprises and charities either individually or as a consortium offering some tailored, experiential management development placements with them for selected high-flyers from their corporate partners and other multinationals. Or those same social enterprises and charities with entrepreneurial ideas related to their core mission, using social media to help them talk directly to supporters working in relevant multina-

tionals and encouraging them either to take up the ideas themselves or find co-workers who might relish such an intrapreneurial challenge.

Imagine too a "dating service" for social intrapreneurs and external partners (NGOs, international development agencies etc) working in the social intrapreneurs' areas of interest: a model suggested by Meg Jones who works for the International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the UN and the World Trade Organization, mandated to help SMEs in developing countries achieve export success.

NGOs might consider identifying and targeting their members/supporters working for multinational companies and encouraging them to explore social intrapreneurial ideas relevant to the work of the NGO.

NGOs might also work with existing corporate partners to run experiential learning programmes like the GSK Pulse or IBM Citizenship Corps that might stimulate social intrapreneurs within the corporate partners. Indeed, NGOs may already be working with key individuals in their corporate partners who might have, or be encouraged to develop, social intrapreneurial ideas, with the help of the NGO.

International development agencies have long recognised that it is better to teach a community to fish than to give them fish, and that, therefore, business and broader economic development is fundamental to sustainable development. Indeed, engaging business more systemically has been one of the major themes of discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals which will follow on from the Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

Providing early-stage funding to support proof of concept, as the DfID Challenge Fund did for Vodafone's hugely successful mobile money M-Pesa service in Kenya, could be an effective way of fast-tracking economic development. Do agencies like US AID already have a funding mechanism that could potentially be used to support social intrapreneurs? Are there any existing, effective promotion mechanisms to bring such a fund to the attention of potential applicants?

Developing 'mavens'

We recognise this is a fast-developing field and one that would benefit from further research. As researchers ourselves it might be seen as special pleading to recommend further research. However, we do believe that the proposed efforts to raise awareness, promote, capacity-build and share emerging good practice about and for social intrapreneurs will be greatly enhanced if accompanied by action research. There are a number of researchers internationally who might be invited to help refine and develop a relevant research agenda, perhaps under the auspices of the Academy for Business in Society.

How might a supporting architecture for social intrapreneurism develop? Imagine a world in which:



Gib Bulloch



Innovation and cooperation breed business success and development opportunities

- Corporate responsibility coalitions run awareness-raising and good practice sharing for member companies; and potentially include a social intrapreneur category in any CR awards programmes they might run.
- Business schools teach social intrapreneurism as part of any change-maker courses they might run for MBA students; and offer master-classes and executive education programmes in creating an enabling environment for social intrapreneurism.
- Social innovation Impact Hubs and equivalent centres around the world offer development programmes and peer support to aspiring and new social intrapreneurs.
- The League of Intrapreneurs or a similar grouping develops as an open-source, online centre of excellence, offering case studies, how-to advice, signposting to further help, match-making to potential social intrapreneurial “buddies” and access to online and face-to-face training programmes.
- International development agencies are willing to consider co-funding viable social intrapreneurial proposals and pump-prime capacity-building initiatives.

Each of these things could happen organically. There are, however, opportunities to provide some

light-touch coordination and strategic direction of efforts to go further and faster. Could an existing international foundation extend its remit to promote social intrapreneurism? Alternatively, is this a ready-made opportunity for a high-net-worth individual looking to achieve positive societal impact at scale, to create a new venture to promote social intrapreneurism as, for example, the Skoll and the Schwab Foundations have promoted social enterprise?

To create the “tipping point” we seek, our imperative is clear: we need to bring together sales people, connectors and mavens for social intrapreneurism. ■

- 1 Gladwell, Malcolm, (2000) *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. London: Little Brown.
- 2 Grayson, D, and Hodges, A, (2004) *Corporate Social Opportunity: 7 Steps to Make Corporate Social Responsibility Work for your Business*. Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf.
- 3 Bulloch, Gib (2013) *Harnessing the Herd – Could Social Intrapreneurs represent a “Trojan Horse” strategy for charities*. Business Fights Poverty (March 24, 2013). <http://community.businessfightspoverty.org/profiles/blogs/gib-bulloch-harnessing-the-herd>

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This call to action is adapted from “Social Intrapreneurism and all that Jazz” by David Grayson, Melody McLaren and Heiko Spitzack, to be published by Greenleaf Publishing in March 2014.