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## **Notable Books**

### **How To Change The World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas**

By David Bornstein

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
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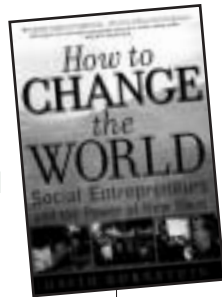
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## HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas

David Bornstein

Hardcover: 320 pages, Oxford University Press (2004), \$28.00



I must admit that I was skeptical when I first opened this book. The idea of a heroic social entrepreneur who could leapfrog the existing nonprofit establishment seemed highly unlikely. Yet, the dozen or so social entrepreneurs described in this book have effected change on an astonishing scale. Take, for instance, Vinoba Bhave, who spent a decade walking across India at the rate of 10 miles a day, persuading villagers to donate farmland to the “untouchables,” India’s poorest of the poor. His quiet persistence led to the donation of more than seven million acres, an area larger than Massachusetts, Delaware, and Rhode Island combined. These examples, and many others, are all the more astonishing because every one of these entrepreneurs achieved their objectives without substantial financial backing.

The growth trajectories of these projects start off very slowly – no overnight successes are to be found. It often takes social entrepreneurs five to 10 years before their idea takes shape. Even then, ideas must constantly be simplified and modified, overcoming unanticipated obstacles along the way, only to hit more obstacles, and then still more. Every setback means a return to the drawing board to modify the idea or its implementation, yet the social entrepreneur continually adapts and persists, confronting new challenges.

David Bornstein shows us that people and institutions – be they government, business, or nonprofit – strongly resist new ideas. Providing home care

to AIDS patients fills an obvious need, yet the stigma of AIDS in Brazil meant that the Renascer, a local nonprofit, couldn’t succeed until it repositioned itself as a provider of

general care and nutrition, never mentioning AIDS. Selling the idea – even a demonstrably beneficial one – takes extraordinary creativity and persistence. The entrepreneur must invent a way around every obstacle – find a pressure point, a source of influence, or a compelling benefit to motivate change. The creative ability to overcome these setbacks turns out to be far more important than the original idea.

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**The creative ability to overcome obstacles is more important than the original idea.**

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Bornstein’s analysis of the practices that made these social entrepreneurs effective calls into question some traditional assumptions behind the ways that many foundations approach social change today. Foundations fund an innovative and often complex seed project for a year or two, conduct an academic evaluation, publish the results if it is successful, and expect the new idea to be replicated across the country. If Bornstein’s analysis is right, then every step of this chain of logic underlying foundation-led change is wrong.

First, however good the original idea, the notion that a better approach can be invented, tested, and replicated after a single trial and a few years of funding contradicts the realities Bornstein describes. One short-term pilot

project will never refine an idea to a reliably replicable and compelling model the way that a social entrepreneur can – by shaping an idea over a decade of persistent trial and error against countless real obstacles. The time horizon for replication and change is decades, not a few years, and despite the long-term stability that foundations preserve through their controlled payout, few have the patience to persevere for a decade without more immediate evidence of success.

Second, the formal evaluation process foundations use focuses on proving the validity of the idea – but it turns out that the idea matters far less than the person driving it forward. In Bornstein’s words, “An experimental outcome is not supposed to hinge on the researcher’s ... charisma or political contacts,” but it seems that the ability to transform society does. However unequivocally the efficacy of a new approach is demonstrated through an evaluation study, the natural resistance to change means that the battle to get it adopted will require far more than a proof of concept. Somewhere there needs to be a person of indomitable will, unshakable dedication, and considerable charisma to bring the change about. What is missing from the foundation model is the unquenchable determination of a talented individual – the social entrepreneur – to impose that new idea on a reluctant society. And without that missing piece, very few foundation seed grants can ever produce significant change.

I highly recommend this book – it will remind you of the scale of social impact we can and should be achieving with the vast philanthropic resources at our disposal, and the realities of how to do so. –*Mark R. Kramer*

*Kramer is the managing director of the Foundation Strategy Group and founder of the Center for Effective Philanthropy.*