

Applied Empathy: At the Heart of Homo Nexus

Bill Drayton is a personal embodiment of many of the ideas I'm trying to capture under the rubric of Homo nexus. Drayton is the founder of Ashoka: Innovators for the Public. It is named after the ruler Ashoka, who unified the Indian subcontinent in the 3rd century BCE. In a world of empire-builders, Ashoka was an anomaly: although he had conquered by force, after the brutal war with the kingdom of Kalinga he converted to Buddhism, renounced violence as a tool of policy, and devoted himself to building creative, community-based, non-zero-sum solutions to social problems, and economic development that benefited all segments of society. This is what the organization that bears his name does today.

Drayton was once a management consultant at McKinsey, where he developed their public practice, and Ashoka's model is relatively simple but extremely powerful. It focuses on three things: identifying and supporting the work of "social entrepreneurs"—people with bold, innovative, sustainable, and replicable ideas about advancing social welfare, as well as the dedication and vision to see those ideas through to fulfillment; supporting "collaborative entrepreneurship"; and building the business, financial, and informational infrastructures to support these individuals and groups. Ashoka is about the insight that local-level, retail change can lead to pattern change, and that pattern change coupled with collaborative entrepreneurship can lead to comprehensive, global change. These are three levels of action that can "tip the world."

Ashoka Fellows have made contributions in efforts as diverse as sustainable fishing ventures in Madagascar, leadership training and social and political participation for women in Nigeria, the social and educational integration of special-needs children in Egypt, anti-corruption education and tools in Colombia, interactive journalism in Thailand, and prison reform in the UK—to give only a very small sampling of Ashoka Fellows' projects.

The Ashoka concept of *applied empathy*—a felt concern for the well-being

and subjective conditions of others that is the basis for practical action—is one of the most important elements in the birth of Homo nexus. As the Dalai Lama has said when discussing the Buddhist concept of compassion, “When a man is pinned under a stone, the key is not to feel his pain but to move the stone.”

As people move between cultures and around the globe in far more fluid and heterogeneous social and economic systems than our species than ever before, applied empathy becomes ever more important. It is the only effective internal check on behavior that harms others and damages the shared environment. It is essential to the ability to mediate and resolve conflict. It is at the core of teamwork. The Ashoka fellows working on empathy know that it can be taught and learned as a skill; it can also be incentivized and rewarded.

This is why empathy is an *essential* element, not a peripheral element, of any serious agenda for world change. Success in solving the problems that challenge humankind in today’s world will increasingly demand an empathic orientation from people in *every* field of endeavor. Doctors without Borders and Engineers with Borders represent a good start. But we also need Teachers without Borders, Bankers without Borders, Lawyers and Scientists, Artists and Programmers without Borders—since borders are becoming more and more irrelevant, and more and more destructive, as our world and our species evolve.

What’s more, applied empathy doesn’t apply only to work in the nonprofit sphere. Enlightened businesses are catching on to the notion of empathy as an economic game-changer and door-opener. For example, David Kelley, founder of the leading-edge design firm IDEO, has made it his mission to spread the concept of “empathic design”—the creation of goods and services based not just on cost, efficiency, or even what looks cool but on figuring out “what humans actually value” and providing it to them through innovation.

Empathic design teams talk to consumers, of course. But they also observe them in their natural habitats, actually using the goods and services they are charged with redesigning. And in many cases they perform experiments designed to help them understand through first-hand experience what the lives of consumers are like. For example, designers asked to plan facilities for a retirement community

spent days navigating life wearing glasses that limited their vision and gloves that reduced the strength of their grip, which made it easier for them to imagine what the challenges of ordinary experience are like for people with 80- or 90-year-old bodies.

Empathic design is a brilliant example of the concept of applied empathy—empathy that is focused not merely on sympathizing with the problems and needs of others, but on solving those problems and meeting those needs through practical innovations. It's a space where enormous opportunities exist, both for growing businesses and for improving millions of lives. And it vividly illustrates why entrepreneurship, in its most advanced state, is not about amassing wealth or advancing one's own self-interest. It's about making wonderful new things grow through connections among people—and about making it possible for Homo nexus to emerge in full bloom.

When Bill Drayton and I first met on a memorable Sunday in 1990, we spoke for almost four hours. It was remarkable for someone of his position and talents, with such demands on his time, to take such an interest in an undergraduate, but, as I would later come to know, it was typical of his generous nature. In a dark corner of the Yale Club, he interviewed me at great length about my family history, the National Forum at Milton Academy, my international interests in Hungary, Korea, and Latin America, and many other things.

When we parted, I walked out of the revolving doors of the Yale Club with an uplifted spirit. After meeting Drayton, I knew that he was someone who would change my life. I knew that we had begun a very close relationship that I would never let go of; and I never did, and neither did he.

I've since come to understand that applied empathy is a way of expressing our instinctive need for community on a worldwide scale, and of developing economic and social collaboration and interdependence *without* falling into the trap of collectivism. In fact, a highly developed capacity for applied empathy is one of the crucial characteristics of Homo nexus . . . a trait that separates this new kind of human from the traditional members of our species, prone as we are to such dysfunctional behaviors as bullying, violence, prejudice, dishonesty, and war.

If Homo nexus is about the creation and maintenance of vibrant networks of people, interacting continually for mutual benefit and creativity, then applied empathy is the glue that holds those networks together, allowing ideas, energy, and resources to flow freely to wherever they will produce the most powerful results.