

SELECTING LEADING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS



DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF A LEADING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

A Knock-out Initial Test: A New Idea

Is the person possessed by a truly new idea for solving a public need? Is it a truly transformational innovation, or just a tweaking of how things are now done? How is it different from what others do in this field?

- **Creativity**

Is the person creative—both in vision/goal-setting and in problem solving? How creatively does the person approach opportunities and obstacles—be they organizational or political? Does he/she create original solutions?

- **Entrepreneurial Quality**

Is the person so committed to his/her vision that it is impossible for him/her to rest until the vision becomes the new pattern across society? Is the person willing to spend years relentlessly grappling with myriad, practical “how to” challenges (how to get to national scale, how to make the pieces fit together, etc.)?

- **Social Impact of the Idea**

Is the idea likely to solve an important social problem at the national level or beyond? Is the idea itself sufficiently new, practical, and useful that people working in the field will adopt it once it has been demonstrated? If it is, how many people will be affected? How much will they benefit?

- **Ethical Fiber**

Is the person totally honest? Would you instinctively trust him/her? (A quick intuitive test: Imagine yourself in danger and ask if you would feel fully comfortable if the candidate were with you.) Is his/her motivation deeply and firmly rooted in a commitment to serve others?

SELECTING LEADING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

Ashoka: Innovators for the Public is a global association of leading social entrepreneurs—rare men and women who possess the vision, creativity, and extraordinary determination of the business entrepreneur—but who devote these qualities to introducing new solutions to societal problems. These unique individuals, found in all cultures, foresee the next step forward for their field (be it environment, education, community development or another area of human need). They then relentlessly pursue this vision until it has become the established new reality, not just locally, but all across society.

Social entrepreneurship is a critically important, emerging profession. The faster society changes, the more it is needed. Moreover, the spread of democracy is lowering the barriers that historically caused social entrepreneurship to lag behind the development of business entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs—citizens who care for their neighbors and cause significant social changes—are in many ways the cutting edge of the democratic revolution, not least because they quickly become role models for others.

Ashoka helps them launch their visions and their careers. It also provides the framework and supports that enable them to find and help one another and to articulate and share their professions’ methodologies, especially the most effective approaches to bringing about structural social change. Even more importantly, it enables them to collaborate in attacking common problems where no single entrepreneur (or even a national group of entrepreneurs) can be as effective alone. Ashoka’s job, in other words, is to provide key institutional support for the field of social entrepreneurship and its leading practitioners.

Each year Ashoka elects a small number of these leading social entrepreneurs into its fellowship. Making sure that it elects only genuinely outstanding social entrepreneurs whose work Ashoka believes will be truly and broadly pattern-changing is the one thing Ashoka absolutely must do to succeed. Their examples define the field, and Ashoka's critical collaborative aspects work only if its members truly respect and recognize one another as equals.

Ashoka, therefore, asks each individual involved at any of the five stages of the selection process — Nominators, Representatives, Second Opinion Reviewers, Selection Panelists, and Board Members — to think only of quality.

Each participant in the selection process represents the fellowship and the profession. Each individual Selection Panel member, for example, should agree to the election of a candidate only if he or she is very personally convinced that there is a greater than fifty percent probability that the candidate and the idea together will change the field at least at the national level (while recognizing that this magnitude of change may take the next ten to fifteen years).

This document is intended to provide a uniform standard for use by all those participating in the selection process when judging prospective candidates. It explains what Ashoka means by a leading social entrepreneur and provides the key criteria and tests to use.

CRITERIA

Ashoka's value, especially as a fellowship, depends absolutely on its electing only the highest quality social entrepreneurs with the most powerful new ideas.

In reviewing candidates, Ashoka applies one knock-out initial test and then four criteria.

Knock-out Test: A New Idea

Ashoka cannot elect someone to the fellowship unless he or she is possessed by a new idea—a new solution or approach to a social problem — that will change the pattern in a field, be it human rights or health, or any other, at the national level (or across a broader region for small countries).



Fellows from Poland and India share ideas during a Global Fellowship meeting on environmental protection. The Fellowship's collaborative value depends on the rigorous selection process.

Ashoka does not invest in new schools or clinics per se. There must be a vision of reform for the education or health care system that promises to change schools or clinics all across the candidate's country or a broader region.

If we cannot state clearly what the **pattern-changing, new idea** is, there is no viable candidacy. This is a tough but fairly clear hurdle. If there is no such new idea, it is a waste of everyone's time to continue through the rest of the review.

Beyond this test, Ashoka has defined four core criteria that candidates for the fellowship must meet: creativity, entrepreneurial quality, social impact of the idea, and ethical fiber.

Criterion 1: Creativity

Successful social entrepreneurs must be creative both as goal-setting visionaries and in the essential follow-up problem solving. They must use their creativity day after day, year after year, to succeed.

Creativity is also a wellspring of the entrepreneur's motivation. Because they own their vision, they are far more dedicated to making the idea the new reality than any employee could ever be.

Creativity is not a quality that suddenly appears in mature mid-life; it is almost always apparent from youth onward.

To assess how innovative an individual is, please probe the following questions:

- Does this individual have a vision of how he or she can meet some human need better than it has been met before? Is it his or her own idea?
- Does he or she have a history of creating other new visions? Is this creativity evident in his or her earlier years? (In the relatively simple involvements of the school years it is often easier to identify who played what role in a group.) Look for a trail of new organizations or other innovations the candidate has created.
- Does the individual have a track record of developing creative solutions to problems? How creative is the problem solving behind this idea? Is this problem solving clearly his or hers?
- Is he or she likely to continue making creative contributions beyond this one idea throughout his or her lifetime?

Criterion 2: Entrepreneurial Quality

Ashoka is looking for the tiny number of people who are, by temperament, that rare phenomenon, the first class entrepreneur. This is the narrowest mesh of our four criteria.

The entrepreneurial personality, whether applied to business or social concerns, is well understood and extremely distinct. Although there are thousands of creative people who have the ability to lead, to administer, or to "get things done", few of these people will ever change the basic pattern in their field at the national level or beyond. Confusing one or more of these leadership qualities with the distinct personality for which Ashoka is looking is the most common mistake people make in applying this criterion. Although these qualities are helpful complements to the entrepreneurial personality type, they do not define it.

"Entrepreneur" is loosely used to describe everything from the corner retailer to the big business bureaucrat.



Fellow Ana Vasconcelos forced Brazil to recognize that one in three street children are girls, and showed how to reintegrate them into society.

Similarly, in the citizen sector, the term “social entrepreneur” might be used to describe the thousands of community leaders and large nonprofit organization administrators. These, however, are not the people we are talking about.

What, then, does define “entrepreneurial quality”?

Ashoka is looking for men and women who are possessed by an idea; and who will persevere in refining, testing, and then spreading or marketing the idea until it has become the new pattern for society as a whole. We are looking for the Andrew Carnegies and the Steve Jobses of the citizen sector.

People with this personality type are possessed by an idea. Almost always this idea has grown out of their entire life history. The interest began germinating when they were young. They then, more or less intuitively, put themselves through a long “apprenticeship” during which they mastered their field in great depth. They must know its history, people, institutions, anthropology, politics, and technology so well that they can see what the next historic step for the field is and how to bring it about. Their personality dictates that they pursue this path.

When they know they have an idea that will change their field, and when they sense they have the personal skills to run with the idea, they have reached the magic turning point in their lives, the moment when the entrepreneur springs into action. They commit their whole being to making that idea the next chapter in the history of their field. They have little interest in anything else. They know intuitively that they are willing to spend the next ten to fifteen years making that historical development take place. Their idea is their mission.



Thai Fellow Somsook Boonyabantha's ideas have transformed chronic urban land conflicts through commercial development which guarantees quality owned housing for the area's poor residents.

This total absorption is critical to transforming the new idea into a reality, and it is for this reason that Ashoka absolutely insists that candidates **commit themselves full-time** to their ideas during the launch phase. If the candidate is not willing to do so, then either the candidate has not developed the idea to the point where he or she is confident that it will successfully change the pattern in the field, at least nationally, or he or she is not an entrepreneur. Since the two most difficult judgments Ashoka must make are whether or not someone has the leading entrepreneur's temperament and whether he or she is ready to move from the apprenticeship stage to the launch point, it is important that candidates demonstrate both with actions and words that they are ready to launch their idea. This is a very key test for Ashoka.

Because true entrepreneurs cannot rest until their ideas have become the new pattern for their society, they design their ideas with that end constantly in mind. For them something that works locally but not society-wide is a dead-end detour they instinctively reject and avoid.

They are as interested in the practical implementation or “how-to” questions as they are in the vision itself. How will they transform an idea into society’s new norm? How will the pieces fit together? How will they deal with the many challenges they will certainly encounter? From early morning to late at night, year in and year out, they constantly listen to their environments, seek out threats or opportunities that might affect their ideas, and iteratively refine their ideas until they are so well thought out that they will succeed at the national level and beyond. Other personality types not driven by this compulsion will commonly not design their ideas so that they are capable of spreading broadly.

True entrepreneurs are **the ultimate realists**. They do not seek to make political statements, nor do they want to be burned at the stake. Entrepreneurs want their ideas to work; that is what counts. This means that, even if they are immature in other ways, when it comes to working on their ideas, they absorb the realities around them with great sensitivity and fidelity.



Early Fellow Mary Allegetti has saved over 12 million acres of Amazonian rain forest.

If there is a flaw in their design, they will change the design. They are not ideological about their ideas. And they are certainly not ideological in any broader sense: ideology closes the mind to absorbing reality sensitively.

True entrepreneurs must be both great visionaries and extraordinarily detailed engineers committed to the persistent pursuit of all the practical “how-to” issues that must be resolved for a new idea to fly.

Others often describe entrepreneurs as “risk takers”. From the outsider’s perspective, the leaps the entrepreneur takes do seem risky. However, the undertaking looks like a reasonable investment to the entrepreneur because he or she has thought through the idea with great attention to how it will work once it is set in motion. He or she has carefully considered every aspect of how the idea will be moved through the series of steps from the point of conception to its establishment as the new pattern. In fact, the entrepreneur is only willing to take steps that he or she believes will lead to success. (As David McClelland pointed out in *The Achieving Society*, the entrepreneur is an entirely different personality type from the bazaar trader or the gambler.)

The entrepreneur will stick with an idea through thick and thin over the long term. That drive, that extraordinary persistence, is a quality that sets leading entrepreneurs visibly apart from most other people. What others see, moreover, is only a shadow of that quality since its chief field of action is within the entrepreneur’s mind, a realm that others rarely understand because they are quickly bored by the degree of detail and thoroughness with which the entrepreneur pursues his or her thinking.

The entrepreneur, once one understands this pattern, is easily distinguished from other personality types. The scholar, the artist, and the poet are satisfied when they see a vision and can express it. They do not have the compulsion to make it a reality. The professional, the manager, and the social worker are satisfied when they have solved the needs of their particular clients or organization. In contrast, the entrepreneur cannot rest until his or her vision has become the new norm society-wide. Everything else follows from this central psychological truth.

The leading social entrepreneur is profoundly different. That is what sets this profession so clearly apart. That is what gives Ashoka its strength and its ultimate promise. That is why we must be so strict in applying this criterion.



Fellow Tuenjai Deetes' work with the hill tribes of northern Thailand has improved the social and economic status of the country's poorest minority group.

There are a number of tests that flow from the above understanding of the entrepreneurial temperament and which are key to applying this criterion rigorously:

- 1.** Does this man or woman truly have a concrete idea of a different future for this field? This idea must not be a vague description of a goal; it must be a concrete engineering plan—both of how this new idea will work and of how to get there.
- 2.** Is he or she possessed by this idea? Is it obvious that this person is not going to be able to rest until his or her idea has become the new pattern? Is he or she unquestionably willing and eager to jump into this endeavor full-time? Is he or she facing up stoutly to the skepticism of the conventional minded? Has he or she shown such a committed pattern before?
- 3.** Does he or she have the realism of the entrepreneur? How well does he or she absorb the realities of the environment? Does he or she listen well? Is he or she free of ideological fetters? Is the idea realistic—on all dimensions, ranging from the technical to the political?

4. Is this person as concerned with the practical engineering questions as with the vision? Does he or she have a good “how-to” map? When you press this person on “how-to” questions down to the second, third, and fourth level, does he or she light up with enthusiasm and engage with you? (This last is an extremely valuable test. The idealist simply will not have thought things through in this way. The true entrepreneur, by contrast, is almost always starved for the opportunity to discuss these sorts of issues with others and will generally truly enjoy an opportunity to do so in any depth.)

5. Did this person in the earlier stages of his or her life show the determination, ingenuity, thoughtful attention to detail, and realism that characterize the entrepreneur? Has he or she taken surprising, perhaps even apparently risky, initiative before to do things differently or to cause others to do things differently? Has this person been oriented towards delivering results, not just doing a job and not just desiring to get ahead? Most successful entrepreneurs have demonstrated such patterns of behavior since childhood.

Criterion 3: Social Impact of the Idea

Successful social entrepreneurship needs not only an extraordinary champion to develop an idea but a powerful, practical new idea that will spread on its own merits. Therefore, this criterion, unlike the other three, focuses on the candidate's idea, not the candidate.

Ashoka is only interested in ideas that it believes will change the field significantly and that will trigger nationwide impact or, for small countries, broader regional change. (The ideas we back almost always have the potential to transcend national boundaries.) Ashoka will not support the launch of a new clinic or school unless it is part of a broader strategy to reform the education or health care system at the national level or beyond.

The first question to ask in applying this criterion is: “Assuming that the entrepreneur behind this idea succeeds in demonstrating it in one place but then disappears, would people in that field look at that demonstration and perceive it to be so new, practical, feasible, and attractive that they

would pick it up and bring it into their work?" In other words, would it spread on its own merits?



Ibrahim Sobhan's reorganized schools increased enrollment 44 percent, benefiting millions of Bangladeshi and other youngsters.

Assuming that the answer to this question is yes, a second set of questions will help assess the social impact of the idea:

1. How many people will benefit?
2. How much will they benefit?

Criterion 4: Ethical Fiber

Although Ashoka staff make every effort to evaluate a candidate's ethical fiber through numerous interviews and reference checks, this criterion is so important to Ashoka that we ask every participant in the selection process to evaluate each and every candidate for this quality rigorously. To do so requires one to resort to instinct and gut feelings, not just rational analysis. The essential question is: "Do you trust this person absolutely?" A particularly helpful test is: "If you were in a dangerous situation, would you relax if this person were with you or would you feel a slight twinge?"

This is a knock-out, fundamental criterion for three reasons:

1. Social entrepreneurs introducing major structural changes to society, in effect, have to ask a great many people to change how they do things. If people do not trust the entrepreneur, the likelihood of success is significantly reduced.
2. The world already has enough untrustworthy public leaders. Ashoka does not want to add to the supply.
3. The quality of Ashoka's collaborative fellowship is dependent upon the free exchange of information and insights. The presence of someone at a fellowship meeting who the other members do not trust will chill the free flow of discussion and inhibit other forms of sharing.

Because this criterion is so important, Ashoka asks everyone involved in the selection process to stretch themselves to bring their intuitive skills to the surface. In fact, the human ability to know whether or not to trust another human is one of the most highly developed and essential survival skills we have evolved over millions of years. Every day we make decisions using this instinct.

Psychological studies have shown that it is extraordinarily acute. However, we have been trained not to express these intuitions easily.

Some people find it helpful to apply the "cliff edge" or "hold the snake" test to bring their instinctual abilities to the surface. Imagine whatever situation is most likely to make you feel instantly fearful. A cliff edge on a dark and stormy night works if you are afraid of heights. For others, the prospect of holding a large snake does the job. For the claustrophobic, a stuck and blackened elevator will do the trick. Then imagine the candidate with you. If you feel a slight sensation of anything other than comfort, your instinct has spoken. Please listen to it and share its verdict.

PROCEDURE

Long before Selection Panels and the Board meet, a thorough process of research and preparation has taken place. Applications are welcome from anyone, but Ashoka's Nominators play a critical role both in identifying candidates and in screening out many more. A member of Ashoka's international staff, the Country Representative, reviews each candidate's application, and then conducts independent reference and background checks, site visits, and interviews.



Panelists study materials...

The staff member drafts a profile of the candidate highlighting the candidate's new idea, the problem it is addressing, its implementation strategy, and the candidate's personal background. The staff member then formulates a hypothesis sheet based upon the "new idea" test and the four core criteria previously described. The Representative presents these materials to the Second Opinion Reviewer and the Selection Panel, along with explanatory background materials.

Once the Representative has made his or her recommendation supporting a candidate, that candidate goes through an intensive second opinion review by a senior Ashoka professional who has never seen the case before and comes from outside the country. This review includes an (typically four to seven hour) interview with the candidate that explores his or her life history and the idea quite afresh. The second opinion review helps the international staff calibrate its work from country to country, helps train the Representative, and counterbalances the natural tendency

of the Representative to become enthusiastic about the tiny percentage of all the candidates with whom they deal who seem to be plausible prospects. The second opinion review also protects the Representative should he or she be subjected to undue pressure from powerful local people or institutions.

Once the Nominators, the Representative, and the Second Opinion Reviewer have completed their work, the final candidates are then sent on to the Selection Panel.

Representing the fellowship, the Panel is responsible for ensuring that those elected are likely to become truly first rate, at least national-scale, social entrepreneurs. In making these decisions, the Panel is defining the emerging field of social entrepreneurship.

The Representative, having undertaken much of the background research on each candidate, is a resource available to the Panel should any questions concerning individual applications arise. However, because the Panel must coalesce quickly as a distinct body and decide independently, country staff should sit somewhat apart and not participate in the discussion.



...before discussing a candidate's case.

During the first half of the Panel, each Panelist meets separately with every candidate. These personal discussions allow the Panel member, in his or her own way, to question the candidates regarding both who they are and the quality of their ideas. These meetings typically last an hour. There are further opportunities for informal follow-up during coffee/tea breaks and meals.

During the second half of the Panel, the Panelists meet privately. First, quickly and without discussion, they go around the circle and give an initial rating of 1 (excellent), 2 (sufficient), or 3 (weak) for each candidate's creativity. The Panelists repeat this process, in order, for each of the other three criteria. However, for the final criterion, ethical fiber, the ranking numbers are defined differently: 1 means "complete confidence"; 2 flags a slight hint or "tickle" of discomfort; and 3 warns of "concern." They then, using this first cut, criteria-focused review, discuss each case, starting with the easiest, most favorably rated candidate and gradually working up to the more difficult discussions. This sequencing allows the group to build cohesion and confidence before taking on the tough cases.

The Panel is guided in its deliberations by three cardinal principles:

- Confidentiality
- When a member knows a candidate personally or has a working relationship deeper than casual professional contact, the member will notify his fellow Panelists and not participate in the decision-making regarding that case. However, if the Panelist is comfortable, he or she may contribute as a knowledgeable resource.
- The Panel decides by consensus; there is no voting. Most importantly, Panelists must not put pressure, even subtly, on any member who has doubts. If one member does not believe a candidate meets the criteria, the candidate must not be elected. In choosing levels of election, the same conservative principle applies. Ashoka asks each participant in the selection process to take affirmative responsibility for each election, a responsibility all other participants must respect.

POLICIES

There are no age, education, class, race, or other such bars to election. Anyone who meets the four criteria is someone Ashoka wants.

Ashoka does make a special effort to reach people from communities that are under-represented in public leadership and the fellowship. Thus, for example, in India we make special efforts to find women, *hijras*, tribals, and other especially disadvantaged segments of the population. However, because quality is the organization's central and defining concern, Ashoka is unalterably and without exception closed to any variant of quotas or double standards.

ACTORS IN THE SELECTION PROCESS

Ashoka's careful selection process has five groups of actors, each with their own responsibilities:

- **Nominators**
 - Seek out candidates
 - Screen
 - Nominate
- **Representatives**
 - Obtain applications
 - Interview candidates
 - Check backgrounds
 - Visit candidates' work sites
 - Draft profiles
 - Formulate hypothesis sheets
 - Make recommendations
- **Second Opinion Reviewers**
 - Review profiles and hypotheses
 - Conduct interviews
 - Make recommendations
- **Selection Panelists**
 - Represent the fellowship
 - Review profiles and hypothesis sheets
 - Conduct individual interviews
 - Discuss/decide cases in Panel
- **Board Members**
 - Review each proposed electee
 - Spot and draw out policy issues
 - Finalize Fellow elections

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of quality. Ashoka is not a welfare organization seeking to help needy Fellows. Ashoka's success comes with the major social changes its Fellows introduce and spread. Moreover, Ashoka's success turns critically on its ability to create a fellowship that stimulates and helps its participants actively to help one another. This is Ashoka's greatest power. However, such a fellowship will only work if the people in it perceive each other as peers. Otherwise, it will not be worthwhile for Fellows and Members to participate.

Because quality (and therefore likely impact) is our unique test, Ashoka only considers financial need at the end of the selection process. It provides financial support to those it elects if and to the degree that the person needs such support to be able to pursue his or her vision full-time. If the person is wealthy or does not need a salary, Ashoka will set the stipend at a level comparable to one rupee per year. On the other hand, if the Fellow-elect needs an attendant for a disabled child in order to be able to leave the house, Ashoka will cover that cost. As a Fellow's ideas take root, their institutions will increasingly be able to pay for their directors—and the level of Ashoka's support typically will decrease.



Panelists choose Fellows by consensus; there is no voting.

Ashoka also weighs local (not international) comparability in setting stipend levels. Whether or not someone needs help should not be a consideration in deciding whether or not to elect that person into the fellowship.

The concern with quality is Ashoka's most central organizing value. We want to be an association of leading social entrepreneurs—people who are causing major changes for the public good. We do not want to help start a new school, but we do want to do everything possible to help someone who is launching a better way of teaching—an idea that can spread far beyond the school where it is first demonstrated. Ashoka does not want to be big. We want to be a strong family that helps all our members dream more confidently and accomplish more surely the major changes that are so needed in the world.

Thank you enormously for helping.

PROGRAMS/OFFICES

(At time of printing*)

Argentina	The Gambia	Pakistan
Bangladesh	Ghana	Paraguay
Bolivia	Guatemala	Peru
Botswana	Guinea-Bissau	Poland
Brazil	Hungary	Senegal
Burkina-Faso	India	Slovakia
Cameroon	Indonesia	South Africa
Canada	Kenya	Sri Lanka
Chile	Latvia	Tanzania
Colombia	Lithuania	Thailand
Costa Rica	Mali	Turkey
Côte D'Ivoire	Mexico	Uganda
Czech Republic	Mozambique	United States
Ecuador	Nepal	Uruguay
Egypt	Nicaragua	Venezuela
El Salvador	Nigeria	Zimbabwe

COUNTRY PROGRAMS IN DEVELOPMENT

North Africa
Central Asia
China
Western Europe
Middle East

ON THE COVER

Ratna Refida (Indonesia, 1997)
Johny Gevisser (South Africa, 1996)
Tania Tavares (Brazil, 1989)
Emmanuel Ache (Nigeria, 1995)
Agus Gunarto (Indonesia, 1997)
Photos: Guy Wulfinfing

* For a current list of Ashoka country programs and contact information, please see our website, www.ashoka.org, or contact our Washington, D.C., USA office at (703) 527-8300.

This document was prepared after extensive review and discussion among Representatives, elected senior Fellows, staff, and board. William Drayton: Author; Tomoko Matsuzaki: Process Manager.

Brazilian Fellow Vera Cordeiro with one of her patients.



ASHOKA

Ashoka International
1700 North Moore Street
Suite 2000
Arlington, VA 22209-1929 USA
Tel: (+1)703-527-8300
Fax: (+1)703-527-8383

www.ashoka.org | www.changemakers.net