

NEW LITERACY AND THE CHANGEMAKER GENERATION

Why Empathy is as Important as Reading and Math

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Key Insights

The *Changemaker Effect* is accelerating the transition to a world characterized by change, which is the polar opposite of the world of repetition society has long known.

Social entrepreneurs are uniquely positioned to help facilitate societal understanding of the learning needs of young people in a world where *changemaking* is the new norm.

Every child must master empathy and teens must be practiced at the new requisite skills of cognitive empathy-based ethics, working in teams of teams (a different type of teamwork), new leadership, and changemaking.



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Transformative education must begin with a fresh look at the societal landscape our children and youth are stepping into. A historical shift has radically changed the complexion and complexity of the world our children must learn to command. While most of us still see the world as it was when we entered (allowing for some expected evolutionary change), it is really quite dissimilar to the one our young people will soon navigate as adults. In fact, the two are in many ways polar opposites, each requiring a very different skill set and outlook. Rising generations must be equipped with an entirely new learning framework for life success and contribution that is aligned with the transformed strategic environment that awaits.



For many generations, society had a distinctive organizational design characterized by a few people at the top of the system telling everyone else to repeat their specialized skills harmoniously, faster and faster. The limits of this *one-leader-at-a-time* model have become evident, however. The acceleration of change and the consequential proliferation of problems have overwhelmed our institutions. Today, the walls of vertical society are coming down to reveal a new strategic landscape that is fast, fluid, and hybrid in character.

With hierarchies flattening, silos collapsing, and advances in technology lowering the barriers to individual participation, more of us have the ability to access information and contribute more fully in every aspect of society. We carry in our pockets and purses, the tools that were once available to only a few. Our personal networks, collaboration platforms, printing presses, and media distribution channels — these are now at our fingertips and can be immediately applied to any problem or opportunity. Our *one-leader-at-a-time* past is giving way to a new *everyone-a-leader* present.

This level of individual empowerment has given rise to the Changemaker Effect on society. A simple explanation of this phenomenon follows:

In the everyone-leads system, the speed of change accelerates relative to our one-leader-at-a-time past. Why? Leaders make change. If you agree that everything you change changes everything, and everyone is doing it — then it follows that we live in an *everyone-a-changemaker* world.

The rapid increase in the number of changemakers is producing unprecedented omnidirectional change in society, and it's occurring at a rapidly

accelerating rate. Evolutionary adaptation has long existed, but this transition from a world defined by repetition to one uniquely defined by change is as dramatic as making the shift from a flat world to a round one.

Let's consider this differently with a story that is obviously American in context, but suitably illustrative of the broader point. Imagine it's approaching game time as the football player makes his final preparations. Alone in the locker room, he

slips his pads over his head and fits them perfectly on his shoulders. Next, he throws on his jersey, the large numbers tightly wrapping around the bulky armor that frames

him. Finally, he pulls on a helmet and carefully fastens the strap across his chin. Now ready, the athlete gives the hard protective shell a slap with both hands and storms out of the locker room to join his teammates. He sprints through the tunnel toward a deep green playing field washed in the warm glow of a bright spotlight. It is a moment for which he has prepared his whole life.

As he approaches the others, his pace slows. Something is clearly wrong. The goal posts that typically mark each end of the field are down. In their places are two large nets. The brown "pigskin" football he knows has been substituted with a football of another sort — one that is rounded and spins out a black and white pattern. The players warming up on the field are unfamiliar. They don't sport the same heavy gear he does. Instead, their hair flies freely in the wind and they are wearing shorts and light clothing that enables them to be nimble.

The game has changed.

There are three likely reactions that follow when the game you know has changed. The first is to freeze in place, watching in fear and confusion as this strange new activity plays out before you. It is a helpless feeling that will keep you a fixture on the sidelines and make you quickly irrelevant. The second is to dig in stubbornly and double down on what you know. In this instance, that might entail lowering your helmet and running full steam into those unsuspecting players. Of course, that would make you worrisome and even dangerous. You would soon find yourself marginalized and cast aside by the others. The third is to *see* differently so you can *do* differently — a mindset shift that facilitates framework change.

Playing in the new game must begin with a personal recalibration to one's environment or circumstance. Real transformation is possible only after mindset shift. This is a daunting prospect, but less so once it is widely understood there is a new game requiring a wholly different set of rules. The old rules will not work in the new game.

We are similarly faced with a game-changing moment as society shifts from a longstanding model based on repetition to the polar-opposite game of change. This process will challenge all of our existing notions for how we work together and participate effectively in society.

For example, teamwork in the repetitive system was based on contribution to the team along narrow lines of position or function. The new game requires a very different kind of teamwork — team-of-teams — to command an environment of rapidly accelerating change. In this system, everyone must have the capacity to form into an open, fluid team of teams working across old boundaries to confront complex challenges and to create new possibilities. Different from the old team built on specialized skills, individuals are valued for their unique range

of competencies, perspectives, passions, and experiences that can be brought to the opportunity at hand.

This gets to a second point about the differences between the two paradigms. In the new game, the premium is on innovation as a function of change, not repetition. If innovation had long been associated with advances in technology to create more efficiency in repetition — the assembly line, for example — we must now rethink that connotation in this new context.

Innovation is, in fact, the ultimate result of a wall falling between two sides that would not otherwise connect. Sometimes technology assists in this, at other times it is an outcome, but innovation is a very human activity. In the team-of-teams way of working, the value-add in any moment is the new team added to an existing one to act on the ever-changing nature of today's problems and opportunities. The ability to tear down walls and connect others into a team of teams is, therefore, a requisite new leadership skill.

Third, we need a rewiring of our collective thinking about leadership in this new era in which everyone leads. Leadership in the team-of-teams system is not linear — it's omnidirectional, requiring "other-awareness." It is a new kind of leadership that also requires everyone on the team to see the big picture and advance solutions that contribute to positive change.

All of this points to the fact that *one-leader-at-a-time* and *Everyone A Changemaker™* are opposing paradigms. The skills needed to navigate a world based on efficiency in repetition are very different from those needed in a world where the premium is on change and innovation (see table).

Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Defined by efficiency in repetition	Defined by change and innovation
One leader at a time	Everyone recognized as a leader and powerful contributor
Team based on repetitive skills executed harmoniously in a vertical system	Team of teams fluidly evolving across old boundaries to address complex challenges in a hybrid landscape
Be practiced at a skill	Be practiced at the core skills of empathy, teamwork, new leadership, and changemaking
Transaction	Interaction
Premium on expertise and authority based on specific knowledge	Premium on ethical fiber — personal credibility and authenticity based on changemaking for the good
Communication through authoritative voice	Communication through storytelling and experiences
Limited distribution of information based on “need to know” to perform a job or function	Open, transparent communication flow based on everyone having information on which to form a team of teams and act

With changemaking as the new norm, the pace of change in every sector and in every individual's life will accelerate. In order to navigate and command this new landscape, everyone must be a skilled and practiced *changemaker*. Herein lie the stakes for the new learning needs of our children and youth.

In a world of interaction and complexity — one that relies on collaboration for success and contribution — the stakes for every child mastering empathy have never been higher. Team-of-teams is a way of working that is highly interactive, and individual integrity, a premium standard in this system, is directly proportional to change pursued for the good. Also, rules can't keep up with this level of change, making cognitive empathy-based ethics essential in our everyday leadership and changemaking.

Youth learning must, therefore, be calibrated so teens are practicing cognitive empathy-based ethics, co-creative teamwork (team-of-teams), a new kind of leadership in which everyone on the team is an initiatory player, and changemaking. Learning in the early grades must be focused on the mastery of empathy as a fundamental skill needed for success and contribution in today's dynamically changing world.

To make this framework the foundation for education transformation, there must be societal awareness of the historical forces that are reshaping the global landscape. What is needed today is a sustained shift in thinking. Mindset shift at scale will produce the broader imperative for framework change at scale.

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To this end, social impact leaders are uniquely positioned to help facilitate a global mindset shift that will lead to societal framework change. Thirty-five years ago, Bill Drayton, a pioneer of social entrepreneurship, introduced the notion that there is nothing more powerful than a bold new idea in the hands of an exceptional entrepreneur innovating for the good of all. Behind his visionary leadership, the field of social entrepreneurship has grown. Today, the organization he founded, Ashoka, has a fellowship comprised of the world's leading social entrepreneurs, numbering more than 3,200 innovators in 85 countries.

Social entrepreneurs are systems changers who work tirelessly for the public. Drayton describes these individuals as society's "essential corrective force."¹ In addition to the ideas they bring to bear

on the world's most complex issues, leading social entrepreneurs have mastered the key skills needed for the new societal paradigm, and they apply them to tackle these seemingly

intractable social challenges. Ashoka social entrepreneurs everywhere — regardless of culture, religion, or political system — act on their empathy and inspire other changemakers by removing obstacles that hinder innovation and create the conditions for changemaking.

Twenty-five percent of the Ashoka fellowship work on issues directly related to the health and well-being of young people, advancing powerful ideas and approaches aimed at giving agency to a generation of confident contributors in the world. They are transforming classrooms, playgrounds, neighborhoods, and communities. Individually,

¹ Bill Drayton, A Team Of Teams World (Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2013)

these leading social entrepreneurs command the foundational skills critical for success in the new strategic landscape. Collectively, they model and promote the *how-to's* for living in a changemaker world. However, more is needed to help society through this shift.

In recent years, Ashoka has devoted new resources and attention to carefully identifying, selecting, and collaborating with teams of educators in primary and secondary schools that are helping young people to develop the strategies and abilities needed for a changemaker world. In aspiration and practice, students are cultivated as active contributors.

The emergence of this worldwide network of Changemaker Schools offers a model others can look to for prioritizing empathy and changemaker skills in student outcomes. The teams in these schools have demonstrated their ability and willingness to develop and test new ideas, rather than just follow established norms. Beyond their local focus, they are also global frame changers with the obvious commitment, influence, and reputation to persuade others to follow their lead.

The Changemaker Schools network and the world's leading social entrepreneurs — in conjunction with parents and social impact leaders in higher education, citizen-sector organizations, business, media, and youth venture entrepreneurship — are contributing to a growing global awareness that the learning framework for young people must be aligned with the new societal landscape.

Everyone A Changemaker™ is not an alternative model for success or a utopia to which we all should aspire — it is the new reality. We already live in a world that requires every person to understand the nature of how the world is changing and the new skills needed to navigate and lead. As this new reality comes into sharper focus, society will have important information on which to act.

The new learning framework will follow societal mindset shift. We will see evidence when principals, board members, and others in and around the education community know that the primary school's success or failure is based on children in the early grades grasping and practicing empathy. Cognitive empathy-based ethics will be elevated as a foundational skill on a level with reading and math.

Teens in middle and high school will be mindful that they must be changemakers practiced at the four core skills needed for the new game (empathy, teamwork, new leadership, and changemaking). Stakeholders will count the number of student-created and student-run groups on their campuses as critical preparation indicators. Parents will actively evaluate if the culture of the school is *can* and students are instilled with a *dream it, do it* belief. Finally, learning outcomes will reflect the new imperative that graduating students must demonstrate the capacity to command the open, fluid team-of-teams landscape awaiting them.

Holding up a new lens on the world we are in will offer a better perspective to discern the qualities young people must have for success and to fully contribute. As this package of attributes becomes the benchmark for youth learning and parenting — having an innovative mind, a service heart, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a collaborative outlook — we will have transformative education that is aligned with the new societal landscape.

About Henry

Hon. Henry F. De Sio, Jr. is the Global Chair for Framework Change at Ashoka, where he advances a new framework for youth learning aligned with the *Everyone A Changemaker™* world young people are entering. He is the author of *Campaign Inc.: How Leadership and Organization Propelled Barack Obama to the White House*. Previously, Henry served as deputy assistant to President Barack Obama and as Chief Operating Officer at 2008 Obama for America.



This essay summarizes Henry De Sio's opening keynote address to the International Symposium, *The Transformative Nature of Education: Underpinning Social and Economic Transformations* (University of Tasmania, July 2015). See more at: <http://www.educationtransforms.com.au>.

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